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A

STUDY OF OTHELLO



"Pardon, gentles all,
The flat unraised spirit that has dared
On this unworthy scaffold to bring forth
So great an object."

—*King Henry V.*, *Chorus.*

OTHELLO

A CRITICAL STUDY

BY

WILLIAM ROBERTSON TURNBULL

WILLIAM BLACKWOOD AND SONS
EDINBURGH AND LONDON
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TO

THE MEMORY OF MY MOTHER

I Dedicate this Volume,

IN SORROWFUL AND AFFECTIONATE REMEMBRANCE

OF HER LOVE AND VIRTUES,

WHICH, THROUGHOUT A LIFE OF TRIAL AND SUFFERING,

REMAINED UNDAUNTED BY DANGER,

UNCHILLED BY SELFISHNESS,

AND UNSTIFLED BY INGRATITUDE.

TO THE READER.

"Faultes escaped in the printing, correcte with your pennes; omitted by my neglygence, overslippe with patience; committed by ignorance, remit with favour."—LILY, 'Euphues and his England,' Address to the Gentlemen Readers.

PREFACE.

IT is not necessary to preface this Essay by any precise account of its scope and design. The reader will find, I think, no difficulty in understanding its plan, or in comprehending the particular purposes and methods by which I have been guided in writing it. The first instalment of a critical inquiry into the ethical conditions of Shakespearian Drama,—based, it may be observed, upon work which I began several years ago, but which has been entirely re-handled and revised,—it may be sufficiently described by saying that it is a piece of criticism in which an attempt is made to treat the "Othello" of Shakespeare from a new and independent standpoint. Should the reception of "this little labour of a lifelong love" be sufficiently encouraging, I may be tempted to resume, at no very distant date, those early studies of which these pages are the imperfect first-fruits.

In regard to the present portion of my design, it may be convenient to mention that although the first part of it treats somewhat discursively of the nature and function of

Shakespearian tragedy generally, and seems besides to occupy what some may consider a disproportionate space in my book, every one of the eight chapters of which it consists has been written with particular reference to the drama with which the volume professes to be specially occupied. It has been my intention to combine exposition with criticism; and to give as complete and clearly arranged a view as I could of the salient characteristics of those tragedies which are grouped round the years 1602-1608. I have endeavoured to fix attention on the main points of Shakespeare's literary evolution during the third or tragic period of his art-life; to state and illustrate what I believe to be the true nature and end of his artistic creation; and to bring within the sphere of popular treatment the history of his ethical and religious opinions and beliefs. These chapters have not only been written under a definite sense of organic relation to the "Othello," but have taken shape under a strong conviction that before any single poetic achievement of Shakespeare can be rightly understood and adequately appreciated, it is necessary, or at least advisable, for the critic to furnish those who do his book the courtesy of perusal with a more or less detailed exposition of the poet's aims and methods and habits of thought.

The proper appreciation of Shakespeare's highest excellence in any specific production of his muse depends, I believe, upon an adequate comprehension of the principles of his art, the sources of his æsthetic opinion, the ethical scope and design of his drama. And it is this impression which has chiefly weighed with me in writing the first

division of my book, in which an attempt is made to illustrate and enforce the truth that our poet "is every way as worthy to be our teacher and guide in what is morally just and noble and right, as in what is artistically beautiful and true." But I feel too deeply the impossibility of stating any truth directly and completely, to wish that what is affirmed in these chapters should be accepted as anything more than partial aspects of Shakespeare's many-sided genius. I do not pretend to be a specialist in this department of literature: nor have I sought to write for specialists. On the contrary, these prolegomena are primarily addressed to those who have not yet entered upon a systematic examination of the poet's works, and who, perhaps, have neither leisure nor inclination to study the abstruse and bulky commentaries of more distinguished writers.

The critical opinions which are offered in the following pages are founded on close personal study. They have not been lightly taken up nor recklessly propounded out of any desire to make a show of new theories and ingenious criticisms. Every judgment and description, unless the contrary is expressly stated, is based on original reading and thought. I have attempted to set forward my own view of the character and import of each figure and event in "Othello"; and, unless in some very rare case specially indicated, I have never delivered a judgment based on second-hand information. Hence, in a few cases, it may be discovered that the verdicts pronounced in these pages differ very materially from those commonly held. I have honestly striven, however, to be conservative in taste; and,

in working out the general design and main features of this study, have attempted to follow, as far as possible, the results of recent Shakespearian scholarship, both English and Continental.

Like most commentators on the writings of our poet, I shall probably be found to have my share of errors and misconceptions. I am quite prepared to hear of these: to acknowledge and correct them. Where my judgment has differed from that of preceding critics of "Othello," I have always been slow to suppose that I could be right and they wrong. On some important questions, however, I have felt persuaded that the error in opinion or doctrine *is* theirs and *not* mine. And I have always endeavoured to give valid reasons for any divergence from received opinion, or the reigning conventions of certain schools of Shakespearian criticism.

If any reader, offended by views which appear to him heretical,—for some persons still cling tenaciously to the feeble superstition that ascribes the attribute of infallibility to men of high literary reputation,—should venture to remind me of what and who they are whose judgment I at times oppose, and what and who I am that should seek by my own reasonings to confute it, I shall simply reply, that as in some cathedral of man's highest art a modest yet tolerably clear-sighted labourer may detect a little rent or tiny blemish in the foundations of the building, which the great architects, busy with the acanthus-leaves, may chance to overlook or ignore, so in the temple of truth, a humble but painstaking worker may independently discover a guiding clue to the motives and meanings of a

great writer, which the best-reputed expositors, bent on the production of beautiful things and the interpretation of mythic symbols, may have neglected or dropped. In any case, no man can be properly called arrogant who is asserting what he believes to be truth, or doing his best to crucify some verbal shuffle such as that of which Professor Ruskin is guilty in the passage quoted at p. 211 of my book. I have therefore exercised the most complete freedom in criticising all opinions and theories that presented themselves for judgment, without overpassing, it is to be hoped, the limits of the strictest courtesy. And I simply ask the reader, if he takes any interest in the volume at all, or the professional reviewer, if he shall condescend to criticise it, to weigh me patiently, and judge me candidly, and follow throughout the sage advice which Shakespeare's greatest contemporary, Lord Bacon, gives to all students and truth-seekers: "Read not to contradict and confute, nor to believe and take for granted, nor to find talk and discourse, but to weigh and consider."

As to the mode in which I have executed the task I have undertaken, I have only to explain that in all essentials I have adhered to the natural—that is, the chronological—method of studying our poet's dramatic writings. The edition used for the purposes of this study, and to which the passages cited refer, is the "Globe" edition, published by Messrs Macmillan & Co., which, over and above the capital merit of a sound text, has the great additional and time-saving advantage of having its lines numbered. It may further be mentioned that, in order to avoid encumbering the text with footnotes, I have only

added sufficient references to satisfy the reader that the original authorities have been throughout consulted, and that no unwarranted inferences have been deduced from them.

Whilst craving pardon for any mistakes that may have crept into the text, and for imperfections of literary execution, I have only to add, in conclusion, that if in this criticism, which certainly makes no pretension to profound scholarship of any kind, and lays no claim even to systematic completeness, I have made a really useful addition to the already vast stores of Shakespearian literature, or contributed any new light to a subject which has taxed many keen and patient intellects to the utmost, I am sufficiently well repaid for the labour which my task has involved. One of my principal objects will have been gained if a careful perusal of my book induces any of my readers to undertake the study of Romantic Drama with a somewhat higher aim than mere verbal criticism.

W. R. T.

GLADSMUIR, MACMERRY, N.B.,
October 1892.

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ERRATA.

Page 25, line 22, *for* "on eagle flight" *read* "an eagle flight."
" 32, line 10, *for* "a hereafter" *read* "an hereafter."
" 42, line 14, *for* "sons" *read* "sous."

PART I.

THE NATURE AND FUNCTION OF SHAKESPEARIAN TRAGEDY



" Nature is made better by no mean,
But nature makes that mean ; so, over that art,
Which, you say, adds to nature, is an art
That nature makes. . . . . .
. . . . . This is an art
Which does mend nature—change it rather ; but
The art itself is nature."

—*A Winter's Tale*, iv. 4, 89.

OTHELLO:

A CRITICAL STUDY.

CHAPTER I.

THE PERSONALITY OF SHAKESPEARE.

I.

PROBABLY no process is more hazardous than that of dividing the literary life of a writer into eras, or of distributing the works of a great poet among the several periods of his life "according," as it is expressed, "to divisions of species." All such attempts have obviously a tendency to become arbitrary and fanciful. In a certain sense, however, the art and life of Shakespeare form a notable exception to this general rule. The peculiar circumstances of his career, indeed, may be said to effect such a division for themselves. It is no doubt true that, despite the persistent interest which so great a theme has naturally excited for over two centuries, we have even now but an imperfect knowledge of his personal history. Although his life has been the subject of that research and ingenuity which are awarded only to strange and suggestive careers, the biographical materials placed at the disposal of the critic are exceedingly scanty, and quite insufficient for determining fully and satisfactorily how he came to be what he was, and to do what he did.

Shakespeare has left behind him few incidents for biography. He has given us no account of his creative impulse, no records of his inspirations, few important comments on his own art, and but little insight into his own peculiar methods. . We know almost nothing of the circumstances and externals which contributed to his development. In the great Poet of Nature, as in Nature itself, the great connecting and interpreting link between the workman and his work seems to be wanting.

And yet his dramas, which should be studied in their totality with a special reference to himself, as Professor Craik in his edition of "Julius Cæsar" wisely recommends—for, after all, the greatest of his works is not "Lear" or "Othello," but his whole work, taken together—may be said to be full of autobiographical confidences. At certain moments of calm and clearness the man somehow overtops the author. His dramas by no means give a complete picture of the poet, but they exhibit some of the most salient characteristics of his nature, and furnish us with materials for forming at least a fair notion of him. There is certainly enough to show that in his commerce with the world he was gentle, candid, upright, and judicious; that in the common dealings of life he was eminently genial, sweet-tempered, and open-hearted; that in his intercourse with friends and companions he was social and witty and graceful; that as man and author alike he was "kind to the faults of others, severe to his own; quick to discern and acknowledge merit in another, modest and slow of finding it in himself." All which corresponds with the actual facts recorded in the varied tributes of contemporary praise. Thus Chettle, in his apology, tells us that "divers of worship have reported his uprightness of dealing, which argues his honesty;" and subsequently his editors, Heminge and Condell, in their dedication assert that their main or only purpose is "to keep the memory of so worthy a friend and fellow alive as was our Shakespeare." Ben Jonson, again, a man who knew him well, forgetting the rancours bred of unsuccessful rivalry, speaks of him seven years after his death as "my beloved Shakespeare," and "my gentle Shakespeare." We have therefore a few facts in evidence to help us to a just estimate of his virtues as a man.

But the primary object of a critic is to determine not what the poet practised—though that must continue a matter of minute and profound interest to all ages—but what he taught and still teaches. This is the one essential matter for criticism proper. Admirers of poetry and painting judge the art of Marlowe and Byron, of Burns and Turner, without knowing or thinking of the artist, without investigating their actual or alleged outrages upon decorum, without attempting to reconcile their conduct with their poems or their pictures. The fate of Faustus and the moral lesson it conveys; the exquisite love-making of Dido; the immortal vision of Helena, the swan-like daughter of Leda, who launched a thousand horned ships upon the purple sea, and, "clad in the beauty of a thousand stars," looked calmly down from the topless battlements of Ilium at the beautiful mailed men struggling desperately in the living tide of war below,—these are things whose beauty is in no sense maimed or marred by the knowledge that Marlowe lived a life of delirious debauchery and died a death of shame in a second-rate brothel. The sublimity of the apocalyptic "Cain," or the splendour of the noble historical tragedy of "Marino Faliero," is not diminished in the least by the remembrance that Byron when he composed these masterpieces had given way to a gloomy and morbid scepticism, and was riotously indulging in various and degrading passions in slums and ill-famed haunts of vice with the commonest courtesans of Venice. The sweet, pure, transparent feeling of Burns's best lyrics, and the deep, grave, but undemonstrative reverence for the old national piety which discovers itself in "The Cottar's Saturday Night"—a poem which, as Lockhart says, does more justice to the better nature that was originally in him than any other product of his muse—are things which remain unaffected by the palpable contradiction between the noble gifts he had and the actual life that he lived: a life that was unchaste and thriftless, and spent for the most part in carousing with ranting and roaring boon companions who were fit only for deep drinking, rough raillery, coarse songs, and Iagoish sentiments about love and women. And the rare inspirations of poetic feeling that are recognisable in Turner's landscapes, which, by common consent, transcend the previous and succeeding work of all

our landscapists put together, alike in mental, pictorial, and executive qualities, are in no wise tarnished or impaired by the fact that at regular intervals the great painter spent his time in coarse and repulsive orgies with the trulls of Wapping, or wallowed in some low and filthy sailors' house in Rotherhithe, or that there was, in a word, a total want of correspondence between the despicable life of the man himself—who was not merely a sensualist but a satyr in his morals—and the noble and essentially virtue-making influence which as an artist he exerted. And supposing for a moment that all the discreditable stories usually associated with the early years of Shakespeare had the slightest colour of truth—most of them, let me say, may be at once set aside as inauthentic, although it must be confessed that a few of minor importance have too much strength of credible tradition to be easily overthrown or dismissed as worthless fabrications—or even supposing that the moral and religious tenor of his subsequent career in London or of his domestic life at Stratford was entirely at variance with those precepts of deep tenderness and infinite grace, those maxims of serene and just benevolence which are to be found in such rich abundance in his poems and plays, it would, I fancy, be a fatally foolish misuse of words to say, that the weight and value of such finished and monumental works as "Othello" and "Hamlet," or "Macbeth" and "King Lear"—tragedies which incontestably enforce the deepest religious sentiments of human nature, and tend to perfect man's ethical state—are necessarily lessened by the suspicion or belief that the poet's own thoughts and actions were frequently destructive or subversive of the severe and lofty sentiments which his art has usurped, or that the principles he propounds in his serious dramas, which are so many trumpet-calls to holy and heroic action, are diametrically opposed to the innermost laws of that feverish and faultful moral state out of which they arose.

The artist is of course in one sense a teacher. But he is first of all a maker. His chief end is to delight man through his imagination. Hence the influence of a man's work is never increased by mere details of personality. And the morality of his life can never be said to be the exact measure of the morality of

his work. If it were so, then the most cursory examination of the records of the lives that have been most useful to humanity would inevitably lead us to condemn as corrupt or discard as worthless, because it lacks sincerity of personal thought or truth of substance, that which not only ministers meanwhile to the adornment of the outward life, but works efficiently towards the enrichment and ennoblement of the human soul. "Although good never springs out of evil," as Mr Ruskin says, "it is developed to its highest by contention with evil." And this remark, it seems to me, solves the difficulty so far at least as it relates to the fine art of Shakespeare, which it is impossible to direct to an immoral end, except, perhaps, in the case of persons whose sensibilities are so blunted that they cannot perceive its fineness, and who in the utter blindness of their naturally undramatic minds give it characters that are quite unconnected with its essential spirit of beauty and of truth.

For no person of average sanity or ordinary sensibility ever imagines that "Hamlet" and "Othello" and "Timon" come from a cruel heart or a jealous mind or a despairing soul. Personal circumstances may modify the details of these dramas; but they never implant the primary conception. They obviously come from the heart and mind and soul of a man who has sinned and suffered, who has felt oppressed by the flatness and faultfulness of human life, with its false appearances, its foiled aspirations, its fated futility, but who has also completely triumphed over these things at last; of one who, through treachery and a misplaced trust, has had his ideals shattered and his aims blasted and his gods overthrown, but who has ultimately restored the freshness of his withered hopes and survived into peace and joy of life; of one who, under an overbearing sense of man-forsakenness, has even been tempted to passionate revolt against humanity and the world, hating all men because a few have proved themselves base or insufficient, but who at length has conquered the evil impulses and recovered the lost germs of good within himself, and, by wise and sustained effort, attained complete self-mastery and self-control and fortitude of will.

Of Shakespeare's actual career and private life little or nothing

is known historically. After so much laborious traversing of record offices and corporate archives in order to elucidate the knotty problem of the dramatist's personal history, it is humiliating to reflect how little has been achieved. Actual research, it may be said, has practically failed; and we are simply left with a fresh handful of half-doubtful traditions that have certainly been fruitful of much speculative inquiry, but which have perhaps only added to the original obscurity that invests the hitherto unauthenticated story of Shakespeare's life that Nicholas Rowe, his first biographer, gave to the world in 1709.

And if we know little of the concrete facts of the poet's outward life, we know very little also of the exact features of his inner nature or moral character. Whether he was himself in all respects a model of virtuous living, a radiant exemplar of his own poetical conceptions and dramatic ideals; whether the high thoughts and pure sentiments of his favourite heroes and heroines gave distinction and delicacy to his own practical conversations, or the laws of conduct laid down in his dramas were those by which his own actions were regularly shaped;—whether, in a word, those characters who are most thoroughly steeped in the efficacy of the Christian Ideal are accurate exponents of his own ethical state, or those opinions and truths and situations which he uses most frequently or treats with especial emphasis are shaped and coloured by his own experiences—these are matters on which, unfortunately, the little that we know concerning the actual facts of his private life does not permit us to judge with anything like certainty. The most that can be said with truth on this score—for the critic must not attempt to accentuate the emphasis of contemporary praise by flattering conjectures of his own—is, first, that whilst we have, as has already been mentioned, several strong and authentic commendatory expressions of opinion from Spenser, Chettle, Jonson, Heminge, and Condell, there is nothing whatever in existence beyond a few half-doubtful traditions which can be said to favour in the least degree an opinion contrary to that expressed by some of the greatest of his contemporaries; and, second, that whilst Shakespeare does not put his individuality into his characters, who, as a rule, "stand morally on their own

bottom," and simply utter words and thoughts that are conformable to their character and situation, much trustworthy knowledge may be derived from them concerning his moral sentiments and religious opinions, sufficient at least to build a strong argument as to his innate and habitual conceptions of goodness and virtue, or his theory of what is morally true and noble in human life.[1] Indeed one of the most markworthy characteristics of his literary workmanship is the unswerving fidelity with which the law of moral proportion is observed in his dramas. And hence his expressions of ethical and religious sentiment may with perfect propriety be claimed not only as a beautiful element of the grand "magic in the web" of his writings but as a part of the personality of the man.

That Shakespeare, whom I honestly regard as the greatest and most widely effective of the modern inculcators of true holiness, was carried away by youthful affections and excesses, I do not in the least doubt. That there was some concealed fault, wherein he was attainted, some "bewailed guilt" that involved shame and misery to himself and his dearest friend, some "old offence" of affection to lament, some frailty of self-love "grounded inward" to subdue, the "Sonnets," which are indubitably self-delineative and self-condemnatory, abundantly prove. But it is likewise certain, I think, that his sin—whatever definite form it took—was followed by an edifying remorse, that he atoned for his faults, that he amended the imperfections of his deeply impassioned nature, that he strove successfully to effect that complete renovation of his being for which he sighed and yearned. And it seems to me to be placed beyond dispute that before the end came he returned to the seriousness of life and the dignity of morality. In his latest plays, which in a peculiar sense disclose a spiritual thread by which to trace a connection between the poet's work and the poet's life, every element of discord is resolved into a sublime harmony of reconciliation and universal love, which seems to exclude from Shakespeare's heart every sentiment of shallow discontent, every feeling of barren resentment or weak disgust of the

[1] See Hudson, Shakespeare: His Life, Art, and Characters, i. 246, 247.

world, every trace of remorseful oppression and unrepentant sourness of spirit.

For my own part I confess that I have no serious doubt as to the personal character of our poet. I am content to read his mind and heart in his works; ready and willing to accept them as a faithful transcript of what is best in the man. And even were it possible to mention greater and more disappointing inconsistencies between his work and his private life than any which have as yet been recorded, I should still confidently point to the acknowledged purity and disinterestedness of his great delineations which represent or relate to us the utmost ascertainable truth respecting visible things and moral feelings, and contentedly adhere to the important principle of art that all good has its origin in good, and never in any fixed form of evil; or, in other words, that the sterling value in the thing done, is but a reflex of a sterling worth in the soul that does it.[1]

Shakespeare's moral temper is thus convincingly shown by his constantly exhibiting and expressing lovely forms and ennobling thoughts—forms that not only enrich the traditions of human goodness, but bring us closer to the general heart and mind of humanity, and even raise us nearer to God: thoughts that are not merely pure and emancipatory, but fit to console us in the sorrows and strengthen us in the conflicts of life. In giving us delight the poet never divorces his work from high thought and truth of life. His poetry, the sublimation of his rarest moods, has always a real human and ethical root. As with Homer and Sophocles and Pindar, everything that it contains—its richness of colour, its high-wrought grace of form, its clear and shining thought, its luscious melody of words—is rigorously subordinated to the exhibition of great human qualities, to the enforcement of deep and sustaining moral truths, to the establishment of noble humanitarian ideals. And in this way the splendid and puissant personality of the poet appears behind the crowd of his poetic creations. In spite of the singular dramatic self-aloofness which characterises him, Shakespeare reveals and unfolds himself simply by doing his appointed work. With all his ability to lift himself into the

[1] See Ruskin, Lectures on Art at Oxford, 1880, 76.

region of impersonal and disinterested art, he betrays his susceptibility to certain impressions and influences, and gives a remarkably frank and hearty expression to what force and meaning is in him. His art, in short, is simply the natural outlet or obedient spiracle of his entire character and aims and waking knowledge. And from it we learn something authentic of his inexhaustible charity and womanly kindliness of nature; his indefatigable humanity and ardent love of all created things; his moral precision and definiteness; his honesty and singleness of spirit and deep-probing and illuminating wisdom; his absorbing interest in all gentle and unobtrusive domestic virtues, and his whole-hearted respect for that true merit which builds its opinions on reflection and sincerity; his lofty patriotism, which includes a passionate love of power and a predilection for royalistic and aristocratic principles so strong and so persistent that at times it reminds us of such courtier-poets as Horace and Racine, with their anti-levelling and anti-democratic instincts, albeit there is no spirit of narrowness in his sympathies such as you find in the productions of the Roman or the Gallic bard. His art also tells us something of his own burning passion for justice; his righteous hatred of spiritual superstition and secular tyranny; his splendid energy in intellectual production; his unaffected reverence for the Holy Scriptures, the highest and purest source of moral truth; and his profound devotional feeling, which seems indeed to be the very basis of the intellectual nature of this man, who emphatically and repeatedly pronounces vice to be the great "deformity" and virtue the supreme and sovereign "beauty" of human life. Shakespeare is not merely a lover of fair forms and fine colours and sweet sounds. He is also a genuine lover of that true virtue which whilst it blends with the daylight is yet full of a spiritual beauty that is born of faith; a simple believer in that ancient religion which whilst supernatural in its origin is still practical and natural in all its effects, a thing that has its roots in man's daily life.

Such a man as Shakespeare must be judged then, as I hinted at the beginning, not by the meagre memorials of his outward life, but by the concurrence of his master-works. These alone con-

stitute his authentic record: these alone form the proper subject for criticism. And the parole evidence of no associate, the dubious traditions of no contemporary note-taker, can for an instant weigh against his written manifest, or countervail the impression of genuine piety and moral purity which is certain to be produced by it upon all truly critical and all properly disciplined minds. By studying his dramatic creations in detail, we not only arrive at his philosophy of human life, but obtain some authentic knowledge of the philosophy of his *own* mind. We get an insight into his own conceptions of virtue and goodness, his own ideas concerning God and man and nature.

All things considered, then, I think I am justified in asserting that we have a sufficient number of striking and satisfactory facts with which to trace, in its several stages, the growth of our dramatist's character and intellect from youth to full maturity. Indeed of all the great poets that have been, no one has shown such a continual intellectual development and spiritual progress as Shakespeare. And so great is this with him that, just as musicians have, not unfitly, classed Beethoven's works in three separate styles corresponding with three well-marked periods of his life, the productions of each epoch being easily distinguished from those of the other two both as regards style and merit, even so, pursuing the light lent us by his plays and studying them in the order of their chronological succession, we can track the inner nature of him by whom this sublime and subtle poetry has been so sweetly schemed, and discover reflected or represented therein *four* distinctive periods of his spiritual and intellectual life, the particular works which fall into each of these epochs being easily discriminated by the marked metrical characteristics of what critics call his early, his middle, and his later style, as well as by differences in diction or taste or judgment, by changes in the characterisation and structure of the plays, by increased energy of imagination and development of moral power, by deepening pathos and wider sympathy with human passion.

Just as there are four branches into which his dramatic poetry may be æsthetically divided — Comedies, Histories, Tragedies, Romances; even so there are four epochs of his life to be

traced through these divisions—the Home Period (1564-1587), the Period of Struggle (1587-1599), the Period of Triumph (1599-1609), the Period of Renewed Family Life or Peace (1609-1616); four distinctive phases of thought on religious matters to be discovered—Hereditary Belief, Scepticism, Transcendental Mysticism (comparable somewhat to that mental attitude of Dante which momentarily suppresses the difference between the real and the imaginary), and Reasoned Belief or genuine devotion and unshaken faith; four great and separate issues to be marked in what may be termed the natural history of the evolution of his moral principles and religious sentiments —the renunciation of conventional beliefs, the lapse of faith as regards current theological traditions, the renunciation of earthly things as ends in themselves, and finally, as evidenced in "The Tempest" (1610), the renunciation of all desire of existence, even of the existence of pure thought;—the period of pure intuition and perfect faith, and the period of his abandonment of all poetic labour being thus coincident with the epoch of worldly prosperity and peace.

By contemplating Shakespeare in connection with his environment we can in a certain sense determine the varied operations of his complex nature, trace the growth and development of his all-gifted and all-grasping genius, and form a tolerably clear and complete idea of the aims and the methods of his art. To a certain extent we can fix the stages of his progress in the domain of ethical and religious speculation and experience; and discover how, year by year and step by step, from 1588—the supposed date of "Love's Labour's Lost"—to 1613—the year in which allusion is first made to his last-written play of "Henry VIII."—he advanced through successive gradations of excellence towards perfection of thought, and eventually passed from the hereditary or conventional belief in mere authority, from which all men start, into that philosophic faith in reason which only comes to us as we approach or enter the season of ripened manhood. In the artistic, moral, and intellectual sense alike we can here differentiate between *natura naturans*, or nature formative, and *natura naturata*, or nature formed. Within certain limits it is possible,

in other words, to point out with luminous certainty the growth of Shakespeare's thought through the medium of his successive works.

If we carefully study the structure of his plays, the different degrees of excellence which they exhibit, and the altering character of his versification—that is, the mere mechanical practice of his art with all its affected or accidental deviations from set rules—we may be able to learn something of the presiding principle which regulates and gives stability or beauty to each product of his mind. And if we observe the gradation by which his art was acquired from youth to full maturity, we may also ascertain in what the adolescent Shakespeare differs from the adult Shakespeare or from Shakespeare the supreme and unapproachable *artist*, who enlarged the boundaries of dramatic poetry and raised it to its highest dignity simply by exhibiting with placid unperturbed stateliness *the general ideas of nature*. But if we earnestly and laboriously study the heart of doctrine and subject-matter of his dramas, which, as projections from a great speculative intellect, are necessarily representative of certain spiritual tendencies or habits, we may likewise be able to determine when Shakespeare as a *master-thinker*, with mind strengthened and expanded by observation and experience, passed under the influence of a higher law, and became not only the God-commissioned searcher of human hearts and the authoritative *interpreter of man to man*, but

> "A priest to us all
> Of the wonder and bloom of the world."

In this way we can arrive at the comprehension of his genius as a whole. The esoteric principle of these productions is no more placed beyond the reach of criticism than the exoteric form by means of which he conveys to us the vast and varied mass of information which he has assimilated and made his own.

No doubt any such attempt to seize the guiding thread of tradition and pass through the creations of the dramatist to the mind of the creator is always attended with difficulty and danger. One writer, indeed, has seen fit to pronounce the experiment not only hazardous but impossible. Emerson, in one of those crisp ever-

lastings of thought with which his chaste and monumental writings are so richly garlanded, has quietly observed that "a good reader can in a sort nestle into Plato's brain, and think from thence; but not into Shakespeare's. We are still out of doors." This, if taken literally, would, of course, place an unredeemable embargo upon everything like æsthetic criticism. Out of doors we certainly are, if by that is only meant our incapacity to push our way by strenuous thinking into the *mentis penetralia* or inmost recesses of the poet's mind, or our impotence to possess ourselves entirely of all the secrets of his many-sided nature either by artifice or by labour. But the statement is dangerously unsound if it is intended to convey the impression that it is beyond the powers of any man who takes full advantage of the materials of deep and useful study which are to be found in "Julius Cæsar" or "Hamlet" or "Macbeth," and which infallibly guide the intelligent reader to their generating idea, to derive from Shakespeare's impersonal thought the true character and importance of every word, act, and event with which he deals, or to estimate the morality of the intellectual agent who creates and controls the entire story from its inception to its climax, or, in a word, to embrace the genius of the poet in its complete spiritual unity. For no writer can narrate facts without having first determined their value and significance in his own mind. He cannot long pursue a certain trend of thought without to some extent betraying a predominant disposition. Nor can he create a character unless he first comprehends it to its inmost fibre.

Wherefore it is absurd to suppose that these plays as products of a human mind can altogether conceal their origin and cause. Shakespeare cannot transcend himself or altogether hide his meanings and sympathies from us.[1] For greatness demands a lucid and masculine sincerity, and presupposes individuality as well as comprehensiveness. Genius is always more or less self-delineative, and draws steadily manward and worldward. Poetry is not a mysterious phenomenon isolated and distinct from the man, the country, the epoch through whom and in which it makes its appearance. On the contrary it must be regarded as the image of

[1] See Dowden, Shakespeare: His Mind and Art, 1882, 164.

the individual life vividly revealed in its eternal truth, and having therefore a necessary connection with the circumstances surrounding it. A poet must of necessity put his personality into his work if he desires to arouse the sensibilities and thrill the impersonal soul of a public that is constantly thinking of other matters than the drama. "*Ars est homo additus naturæ*," said Bacon; and no better definition of art has since been given. Hence everything the poet does and says is after a native law which breaks through all disguises, so that the personal sentiment cannot fail in some degree to discover itself. All that we have to do is to open our senses, clear ourselves of all obstructions, and suffer the intellect to see. For if we cannot nestle into the poet's brain and think from thence, he at least can enter by a private door into every one of us; and, in our purer, more apprehensive moments, undisguisedly *reveal himself*. The one great necessity is a receptive condition of mind. For the thoughts that burn within the soul of Shakespeare are the same that ferment within our own bosoms. Only we cannot articulate them. We cannot create Hamlets and Othellos and Lears; but we can sympathetically comprehend and enjoy them; and through these sublime creations obtain a fragmentary, incomplete, yet not unsatisfying view of their creator, who has stamped them with the indelible impress of his own individuality.

II.

The attempt, then, to organise Shakespeare's impressions, beliefs, reminiscences, his divine transports and grand melancholies, into one complete and harmonious conception, is reasonable and legitimate if difficult and dangerous. Studying the ethical effects produced by his Tragedies, and sifting out and ascertaining the real import of every fact, character, and allusion which they contain, we may be able to seize and comprehend their causes or generating principles and grasp the writer's true intent. But at the outset we must guard against the judgment-warping temptation which such an inquiry undoubtedly holds out to us, of laying too much emphasis at any time upon the poet's essentially

vicarious enunciation of truths and doctrines through particular *personæ* with whom he may have a certain sympathy. His thoughts and emotions do not necessarily respond to theirs as one perfect stringed instrument vibrates responsively to another at the slightest touch. In respect of characterisation, indeed, Shakespeare is a sort of "impersonal intelligence"; a poet who possesses the power of concealing or losing or etherealising his own individuality in the objects or persons he brings before us, and from whom therefore, rather than from him, everything seems to proceed.[1] We always find in him a direct, fearless, whole-hearted sympathy with the men and women he creates; a thorough at-homeness with human nature "in the transpirations of individual character." But still dramatic self-aloofness is one of the most salient and distinguishing attributes of his artistic nature.

When we come across some deeply marked trait, or meet with some strain of thought and feeling more than usually intense, we are very apt to say: Here is Shakespeare caught and fixed for ever as in deathless marble; not simply the interpreter of what interests his feelings, but the singer of what springs up spontaneously in himself. But we soon discover our mistake. He has simply inspired Lear and Antony, Henry and Touchstone, so that they may express in language appropriate to their circumstances and individual characters their own ideas and emotions. With many of his ideal beings—Edmund, Iachimo, Shylock; the great archetypes of free-thought in the old historic sense, of cunning, of race-hatred—he has little sympathy, although imaginatively he feels the very deepest interest in conceiving and working out these characters, and delivers the whole and pure truth respecting them. As a rule, he endeavours to grasp a mode of thought and feeling not peculiarly his own, but still one which has deeply engaged his intellect and recommended itself to him as a salient or subtle revelation of human nature.

In a sense, therefore, there are always two conceptions of truth in the Shakespearian plays—the poet's and the puppet's. The invisible Shakespeare, who thus draws from nature and adds to it, speaks through the type. But the creation only betrays a

[1] See Hudson, Shakespeare: His Life, Art, and Characters, 1882, i. 168-175.

momentary predominance of the finite and individual over the general truth which he strives to reach: it either speaks less or more than the creator would care to confess to in his own proper person. You frequently find him giving expression to what has powerfully fascinated his imagination, but not what, so far as we can judge, has any great hold upon his own personal sympathies. His characterisation, indeed, always involves a process of "double consciousness," to use the happy phrase of Mr Hudson. He possesses, that is, the strange faculty of being truly himself and truly another at one and the same time.[1] The sentiments and opinions to which he gives utterance are characteristic of the persons from whom they proceed, but not necessarily so of himself. In other words, he reaches the truth of nature ideally, not historically, although to the freedom and freshness of original creation there is always added the solidity and verisimilitude of fact.

III.

Let me illustrate my meaning by an example. Shakespeare in the sense in which I am now writing does not even hate Iago, whom he has delineated with strict psychological truthfulness and dramatic propriety. On the contrary, he showers down upon him the most precious riches of his mind; and even manifests a certain pride or self-satisfaction in respect of the skill, energy, and perfect insight with which the character is conceived, worked out, and fitted to his purpose. Mentally he has some sympathy with Iago because he is a fruitful source of instruction and wisdom. He puts his own intellectuality into him, and allows him therewith to exhibit and develop himself in his own way, as nature does. He is a signal example of the all-observing, all-fathoming genius of our poet; but one never thinks of searching the satanising speeches of this intellectual sensualist in order to find the key wherewith to unlock the secrets of Shakespeare's own unfallen intellect. Iago with his evil and exuberant egotism is only the man of the man; the window through which the metaphysical eye of the poet looks

[1] See Hudson, *ut supra*, 172.

forth; a terrible ideal of human nature in the individual, which by a sovereign mercy is but fragmentarily represented in the entire race, and is rather divined indeed by our own inner consciousness than actually found in any example of real life; in a word, the imaginative form into which, for dramatic purposes, the poet has for the moment cast his intellectual powers. Although the sentiments and opinions which, for purposes of edification,—albeit there is nothing of ethical didacticism in "Othello,"—he puts into the mouth of the Ancient are all drawn from his own consciousness, he is not consciously and intentionally exhibiting himself. Neither Romeo, nor Iago, nor Hamlet, nor Falstaff, nor Hotspur, nor Timon is a representation of what their creator is, but simply what he knows and feels he might or should be, if he were not himself. They are studies and inspirations; minute, elaborate, and conscientiously executed pictures of human life. In these characters we have all the fervour and subtlety, the depth and strength, the gaiety and gloom, the delicacy and mansuetude of our poet's luxuriant genius. But not one of these beings who spring up before us, with that ideal palpableness which belongs to the very highest poetic creation alone, can be said to represent the complete and complex nature of the dramatist, although every one of them potentially existed in him. They are all born of Shakespeare's own heart, sung of Shakespeare's own muse; but they are not Shakespeare in the sense in which the sightless Samson of the "Agonistes" is Milton forsaken of his wife, blinded and betrayed, and totally defeated by an irreversible fate, himself, his party, and his cause completely wrecked by the Philistines of the seventeenth century. Although his dramas are all essentially realistic, pregnant with real woe, and charged with a pathos, expressive of actual suffering, that is far beyond the power of any other writer of fictive tragedy, our poet's personal experience is never thus generalised into a dramatic exhibition. And what the characters think and say and do affords no obvious and perfect clue, therefore, to the knowledge of what the actual Shakespeare thought and said and did in his own proper person.[1]

[1] See Richard Simpson, Philosophy of Shakespeare's Sonnets, 1868, 1.

And yet in the deepest and most precious sense Shakespeare's autobiography is written in colossal cipher in his plays. The "Samson Agonistes" is scarcely more helpful to the biographer of Milton than "Hamlet" or "Coriolanus" to the student-reader of Shakespeare, who does not discover himself here and there, in this character or in that; but, to the capable or instructed eye, reveals himself *everywhere* in his work. That is to say, he has not quite shut himself out from the record of his labours, or completely annihilated himself in favour of his characters; so that the poet's spirit continually shines forth independently of the imaginative shapes which it imposes on itself. Goethe and Kreyssig and Coleridge, who possess the necessary sanity of judgment and intuitive insight, are thus able to catch its scope and gist, and trace the relations of the poet's ideas through the central currents of his essentially impersonal thought to the visible tendencies of the great and vigorous age in which he lived, and to which in reality much of his greatness is due. The synthetic criticism of these writers has done much to rescue and restore the life of his inmost being which lies behind his works, his opinions, his artistic process. But why depend upon the work of synthesis and exposition, of analysis and discovery which we get from these writers? If there be anything of Shakespeare in us we can independently trace the peculiar impressions, the cherished convictions, the active impulses of his moral nature; and at any moment discover for ourselves, dimly and imperfectly it may be, the dominant faculty of his impassioned and unfettered genius. He is a creature with concrete relations and a full objective life; and his art is neither more nor less than the transformation into ideal and imaginative shapes of a system and philosophy of human existence which he has gradually acquired, matured, and made his own. Thus all his plays, as has been said, are documents written over everywhere with facts about himself. Each drama has necessarily a kind of ground-tone which in a way indicates his mental condition at the moment of conception. There are fine vibrations of emotional life to be found in the speeches of his leading characters, which furnish a slender yet trustworthy clue to his own ideas, sympathies, and beliefs. And

when we pass from the graceful and glad-hearted Comedies that are grouped round the years 1588-1601, to that wonderful series of dramatic writings in which he sets forth the tragic mystery of human life (1602-1607), and then take up the pure, tender, calm-souled Romances of the fourth period of his art-life (1608-1611), we are irresistibly led to the conclusion that in Shakespeare's own mind there were strictly correspondent transitions from innocent vivacity and kindly mirth and the keen quick unreflecting enjoyment of existence, to deepest grief and intensest spiritual conflict in the very heart and centre of things; and that finally, having delivered himself from the strong urge of imagination and feeling, and gained a sure grasp of the positive facts of life, his severity and world-sorrow, so undisguisedly displayed in the "Hamlets" and "Othellos" and "Lears" of the Third Period, were so tempered and so purified that the issue of his latest plays—"The Winter's Tale," "Cymbeline," "The Tempest"—notwithstanding that these also touch upon the saddest and darkest parts of human life and deal with errors and wrongs grievous and cruel as those of the great Tragedies, was inevitably an issue of joy and peace and atonement for wrong, loving justice and grave tenderness and forgiveness to men; or, in brief, RECONCILIATION, "word over all, beautiful as the sky."[1] In plainer speech, Shakespeare's power of thought increases visibly and steadily "both in sure grasp of the known, and in brooding intensity of gaze upon the unknown," as, year by year, one great drama succeeds another in unbroken series; and his poetry, the attractive garb in which he clothes his practical wisdom, moves naturally and inevitably with the march of his mind; so that one can in a sort discern, in his ample pictures of human life, his own settled convictions on those momentous questions which loudly knock for answer at every heart.

[1] See Dowden, *ut supra*, 165, 406.

IV.

But this, observe, is far from saying that in every case—in "Macbeth," in "Othello," in "Timon of Athens,"—he is literally expressing his own personal thought and generalising his own actual experience, although, as I have just indicated, each of these dramas undoubtedly reveals in some measure the genuine emotions of a living man who has been "tried and tutor'd in the world," and contains the record of his fundamental opinions concerning the things of life. One naturally and with a certain warrant arrives at the conviction that many of the wonders of his exalted genius—those "golden apples in silver dishes," as Goethe has called them—are, in some measure, accessible to the appreciating spirit of an earnest critic. But, remembering the boundless many-sidedness of his nature, it is unwise and uncritical, whilst attempting to set forth the tendencies of his mind, the characteristics of his ethical views, and the design of his works, to lay hold of separate opinions and isolated facts and casual exhibitions of emotional life, and dogmatically assert, like Rio and Birch and such like sciolists, This Shakespeare thought and felt! For his plays are in no sense monodramas. They are not personal poems like the "Prelude" of Wordsworth or the "Alastor" of Shelley or the "Childe Harold" of Byron. And although he has obviously identified himself for the time being with certain characters rather than with others, it is equally unwise and uncritical to say for certain: This man—Romeo, or Hamlet, or Henry, or Prospero—is the true exponent of his mind and will; the ideal form in which the genius of the poet most characteristically embodies itself; a type of Shakespeare in his matured or final stage of thought; the Œdipus who solves the riddle and unlocks the secret of his heart.

It is by no such means that one can ever hope to construct the poet's mental figure in its perfect integrity and just coherence. For although, in periods of quickened existence or in times of spiritual discovery, alteration, or development, Shakespeare assuredly gives what I am obliged to call an accidental prominence

to certain observations, opinions, topics, and characters, there is no halfness or loss of balance, no headiness or egotistic imperfection about him. Living in a busy, productive, but uncritical age, breathing its air and reaping the rich fruits of its general culture, he has none of that self-love, none of those constitutional peculiarities and cherished enmities which produce in so many of his senior contemporaries a perilous irritability of temperament that ultimately leads, in some instances, to the adoption of a strange and most reprehensible practice, to which, however, Shakespeare's great rival the learned author of the "Poetaster" gives countenance—that, namely, of introducing the writer of the play upon the stage, as the chief critic of the characters, and the censor of the morals of the Elizabethan era.[1] Unlike Jonson and Marston and good old Dekker, he has no personal prepossessions or self-assertive predilections which importunately demand such dramatic satisfactions. He has not only freed himself from the soul-cramping spirit of formula, but delivered himself from the narrowing restraints of personality. His soul is so possessed by the genius that stirs within him, as to leave no room for any self-regarding thoughts. "An omnipresent humanity," as the case has been well put, "co-ordinates all his faculties"; and of all writers of dramatic poetry, in ancient or in modern times, it may with propriety be said of him that he represents "the farthest reach of subtlety that is compatible with an individual self."[2] Although in many places we have reason strongly to suspect that he stands pledged in his own person to the doctrines there set forth, we cannot directly identify him with his work. It is permissible to say something concerning what appear, from their frequent repetition under new disguises, to be his most eminent experiences, his chief visions of truth, his greater discoveries about human life which, so to speak, supply the axis on which the frame of his drama turns. If we cannot find the man himself, we can in a sort discover what made him operative. But no single product of his muse, be it "Hamlet," or "Othello," or "Timon

[1] See R. Simpson, The School of Shakespeare, 1878, ii. 7.

[2] See Emerson, Representative Men, Lect. V., "Shakespeare; or, The Poet."

of Athens," or "The Tempest," can be said to give to his world-wide and unique experience its highest, its fullest, its most absolute expression. Each drama, it is true, is covered over with facts about him; full of hints and tokens and significant memoranda which speak to the intelligent. But this dim, imperfect, stenographic self-registration must not be allowed to haunt and waylay us in the course of our inquiries, or deceive and mislead us in our conclusions as to the scope and purpose and generating principles or inspiring power of his art. For Nature in all her breadth, freedom, and universality, and not self-realisation, is the one final and abiding object of his study. In the plays he is "broad and general as the casing air"; he aims at the conquest of universal nature and of universal truth. And the beginning, middle, and end of his business as dramatist is the imitative expression, or rather the vital reproduction of the forms of Nature with that uncompromising truthfulness and unhesitating fidelity to fact which only come from direct imaginative intuition, from a great life actually experienced, and from strenuous self-possession and self-mastery.

V.

Now the point which these remarks are chiefly meant to enforce is, that it is easier to feel the strong personality of Shakespeare's dramatic poetry than to define critically in what it consists. For, like a sudden apparition, "servile to all the skyey influences," it betrays itself everywhere, as I have said, yet tarries for inspection nowhere. You can rise to the comprehension and enjoyment of his pictorial and concrete exposition of universal nature; but you cannot quite grasp the generic secret of the poet's own airy personality, or clasp so fleeting and omnipresent a phenomenon within a frame of theory. You can educe from this great body of powerful and significant work fundamental opinions concerning the things of life—those doctrines and principles which constitute what Pope and Johnson designated his moral system. You can even form something like an adequate conception of the secret formative psychological processes by which his characters are

conceived, discriminated, and sustained. You can, in a word, estimate his power of vision, which seems to be coextensive with nature and with truth; his deep-probing faculty of thought, which interprets all the grand events of history, justifies and explains the striving impulses of his own age, and unfolds a new experience to us; his marvellous receptivity, which enables him to absorb and make his own the cumulative culture of the Elizabethan period; his keen and omnipresent feeling for the great course of human events and his active sympathy with the everyday debate of the world, from whence arises that sort of realistic verisimilitude which is to be found even in his most fanciful or ideal characters; and, finally, his self-surrender to the moral sentiment and his stern unfaltering fidelity to fact, which may be said to form the chief sources of his victorious strength and enduring greatness. It is the office and right of the intellect to make such an estimate. But with all your faculties of thought and knowledge you cannot attenuate Shakespeare to a theory, since, as has been finely observed, "he is for ever passing beyond the limits of your narrow jurisdiction by the privilege of a higher life."[1] He is a perpetual flyaway—elusive, ubiquitous, full of disguise; bad to catch as light or sound. His all-penetrating, all-illuminating genius "halts not particularly." It "flies on eagle flight, bold and forth on;" and will not be compelled in any mechanical manner. Wherefore, in respect of his poetry, it is always difficult to frame critical definitions; often impossible to give one in terms which will satisfy the mind of a logician.

But it were something beside my present purpose to attempt a precise and final distinction between Shakespeare's work in the sense of universality and that of all other dramatists. Dryden's famous definition of our poet in an excellent passage of the 'Essay on Dramatic Poesy' is, or ought to be, familiar to all; and anything I could say would only be a repetition in weaker words of this admirable eulogy which has not only "exactly and precisely based the structure of Shakespeare-worship" in this regard, but summed up in a few clear sentences all the salient attributes

[1] See T. Kenny, The Life and Genius of Shakespeare, 1864, 140; also Dowden, *ut supra*, 429.

of the many-sided nature of him who may with strict propriety be said to personify English Genius in the sixteenth century; in whom, at least, the dramatic art of the period completes and accomplishes itself.

It is needful, however, for a due understanding of the following study of the tragedy of "Othello" that an answer should be given to the question stated at the commencement of this chapter—namely, in what does the strong personality of Shakespeare's poetry consist? To this question I must endeavour in the succeeding chapters to render at least an approximate answer.

CHAPTER II.

THE POET'S CHIEF INTEREST IN LIFE.

I.

A MERE surface-study of our poet's works will reveal three mark-worthy things, of which I have already spoken perhaps at too great length. The first is a subjective peculiarity of the artist; the second is a great life actually experienced; and the third is technical skill heightened to perfection by the practice of years. And it seems to me that Shakespeare, whether we regard him as the intelligent playwright of an age or as the poet or dramatist for all time, has always three guiding and governing purposes consciously before him when he sets to work. In the first place, he aims at telling in every play a dramatically complete story; in the second place, he resolves that the evolution of this story, derived from Plutarch or Da Porto, from Cinthio or from Holinshed as the case may be, shall be brought about by means of purely human and probable characters—than which perhaps no stronger differentia from the work of such contemporaries or immediate successors as Marlowe and Marston and Webster could be found; and in the third place, whilst as a rule nobly and serenely indifferent to the fashions and opinions and criticisms of the world, he so far accepts the doctrine that the "drama's patrons" are the framers of the "drama's laws," and that "those who live to please, must please to live," as to give such form and ornaments to the characterisation and working out of the plot as will most surely

tend to enlist on his behalf the favour and sympathy of the Elizabethan playgoer.[1]

In other words, his dramatic greatness is the result of deliberate intent or of a wonderful power of conscious intellect, quite as much as it is the result of the happiest instinct or unconscious productiveness,—a fact to which the impartial testimony of Ben Jonson's famous *éloge* unmistakably points.

> " Who casts to write a living line, must sweat
> (Such as thine are), and strike the second heat
> Upon the Muses' anvil ; turn the same
> (And himself with it), that he thinks to frame;
> Or for the laurel he may gain a scorn :
> For a good poet's made, as well as born,—
> And such wert thou."

The truth thus perceived and expressed by his sturdy strong-thewed and right-thinking contemporary, that Art and Nature are co-operant in the fabrication of our poet's plays, is one which, strange to say, is entirely overlooked by the great mind of Milton, who, with some little minuteness, contrasts the flow of Shakespeare's "easy numbers" with the evolutive processes of "slow-endeavouring art." But it does not escape the subtle and comprehensive intellect of Coleridge, who properly understood the merits and the methods of the dramatist. He regards him, he tells us, as "a nature humanised, a genial understanding directing self-consciously a power and an implicit wisdom deeper even than our consciousness."[2] And, whilst contrasting, in his Lectures of 1811-12, the living power of Shakespeare's general delineations — their inwardness and mystery of vital movement — with the servile imitation and lifeless mechanism of his precursors and many of his contemporaries, he strongly insists upon the fact that in addition to the sweetness and spontaneity, the instinctive harmony and happiness and easy movement of nature, there is always to be discovered the clear forecasting intellect, the conscious

[1] See George Saintsbury, A History of Elizabethan Literature, 1887, 170.

[2] See Lectures and Notes on Shakespeare (Ashe's edit., 1883), 229 *et passim.*

judgment and reflection, the perfect method, and manipulative skill of the observant, studious, and well-disciplined artist, whose genius, like all other active powers, is not opposed to, but rather of necessity circumscribed by, rules, without which, indeed, that union of power with beauty which is never wanting in the great achievements of dramatic poetry would be impossible of attainment.

II.

In everything Shakespeare does he goes by reason and purpose quite as much as by nature and instinct. There is a perfect co-operative union of instinct and understanding, of pure intuition and conscious judgment. He is not merely a *Vates* or poet-prophet sent hither to make impressively known to us in moments of meditative trance the sacred mystery of the universe — the impassioned hierophant, in Shelley's phrase, "of an unapprehended inspiration" — but, like Goethe and Schiller and all our great world-poets, an observer and artist who, in the main, confines himself to a rigid experience. What is the "Faust," or the "Wallenstein," or the "Hamlet" but a daring poetic synthesis of the realistic and idealistic view of things—an ample picture of human life that comes recommended by the hard fidelity with which it is based on positive concrete fact? "God, when he makes the prophet, does not unmake the man," says Locke. And the history of these writers who appear to owe almost everything to industry or design, and who seem to depicture from their own vivid and familiar knowledge, points and enforces the remark. Shakespeare's insight is inevitable and his report is true, because he possesses a wide far-seeing never-resting eye that has been diligently trained to traverse the whole scale of human experience and discover the hidden truth of things, and an energetic all-embracing constructive intellect whose natural powers have been drilled into reproductive efficiency by the stringency of self-discipline and a spirit of active and inquiring thought that is continually stimulated and nourished from without. He is a man of calm creative perspicacity, who has an invariable method and order

in the acquisition and the delivery of truth. In his drama, whose basis is essentially human and mundane, there is always to be discovered a union and interpenetration of the universal and the particular. He adapts the concrete facts of human character and human destiny to the special purposes of his art; but his penetrative and creative imagination transcends the narrow limits of time and place, and reproduces not the relative or accidental forms, but the absolute and permanent spirit of Nature and of Truth. His judgment, in short, is as Coleridge long ago pointed out, fully equal to his genius; and his greatness is achieved by the hardihood and thoroughness of his study of nature and man, by industry, and skill, and severe and patient exercise of thought. The profound and sympathetic psychological study of "Hamlet," let us remember, is no fluke. Nor is "Othello" a mere lucky hit of instinct. The vast improvements and superb developments and vital changes of character, name, scene, speech, and phrase which he made upon rewriting the one,—let the reader contrast some of the soliloquies of the piratical and unrevised First Quarto of 1603, which resemble the gabbling recitations of a drunken player reported by the halting pen of a seventeenth-century note-taker, rather than the earnest, impassioned, carefully thought-out utterances of a master-dramatist, with the corresponding speeches in the received text of the play, which is made up of the Second Quarto and the First Folio of 1604 and 1623,—and the wonderful judgment which he displayed in altering and refabricating the facts and incidents of a forgotten novel in the case of the other, are not only sufficiently demonstrative of the fact that consciousness and intention are not fatal to the highest literature, but that there was ample justification for the quaintly worded complimentary references of his contemporaries, who, whilst praising his "excellent phantasy and brave notions," his tragic force and fanciful inventiveness, did not forget to make mention of his "right happy and copious industry."

III.

But in this preliminary survey of Shakespeare's artistic aims and methods and habits of thought, I am led to ask some questions of more special import than those which have as yet concerned us; and to attempt a more detailed examination of the three purposes which, according to the statement made on a preceding page, the poet had consciously before him in the preparation of his work. In his capacity of dramatic poet, what, let me ask, is Shakespeare's chief interest in life? In its distinct and special form, the poetic faculty or creative and reproductive imagination — that which constitutes the immediate instrument of Shakespeare's influence and authority over the deep wide world of dramatic emotion— may be most conveniently described as the innate faculty of "continuous constructive dreaming"; the power, in our poet's own words, of "bodying forth the forms of things unknown," of turning meanings and feelings and passions into actual "shapes" or vivid and representative phantasies. But this faculty is always stimulated and excited into active and efficient exercise by a predominant intellectual interest. And in Shakespeare the paramount interest in life is simply that of *universal curiosity;* a sleepless and insatiable desire of knowledge in respect of the ultimate sources of man's power and weakness, of his success and failure in his dealings with the material, social, positive world, and also as regards the inner truths of human existence, the infinite and irreversible issues of life and death, the continual struggle of good and evil, and the close and constant relation between man's soul and the dark and terrible forces of the world in which he moves;—the causes, in short, which most surely lead to the exaltation or the ruin of his spiritual nature.

Shakespeare has an enlarged and energetic interest in real transactions. He strives to compass and comprehend the knowable —everything that lies enclosed within the limited world of the practicable. But he indulges in loftier and diviner flights; and, in moments of persistent upward striving, he is apt to think "thoughts beyond the reaches of his soul." With all his lumin-

ous and coherent positivity and passion for concrete fact, there is still observable a tendency or leaning towards what is dim, vague, and mysterious. This is especially true of "Hamlet" and "Macbeth," of "Othello" and "King Lear." With powers but finite, he possesses infinite desires; the objective genius is overriden at times by the subjective; and the medieval preoccupation with the world beyond this world, which, surviving in the Renaissance, as Mr Symonds tells us,[1] led the manliest minds of the sixteenth century into gloomy vaticinations and sinister imaginings about death and a hereafter, is a thing distinctly traceable in the mental history of Shakespeare. The reader will at once recall the dismal soliloquisings of Hamlet, Macbeth, and Othello, and the dark fierce "tempest in the soul" of Clarence or of Claudio, which for direct intensity of spiritual agony are not equalled by anything that comes from the conscience-laden soul of Faustus in the fifth act of Marlowe's immortal tragedy.

Like the greatest of his senior contemporaries, Shakespeare often broods with heartfelt emotion and passionate intensity of thought over that which never can be firmly grasped and fully known. With all his stubborn realism he cannot altogether turn aside his thoughts from infinity; and at times it even seems that to him, as to Dante and Shelley, the actual world is less than that dim spirit-realm which lies within it and beyond. He too, in a sense, pushes knowledge beyond ordinary human limits; he too has a peculiarly pregnant and rich relation with the real and infinite supernatural world. He certainly does not exhale his strength in sighs and lamentations, or transform his "sense of natural enjoyment into curiosities of mystic joy," like Dante, whose main imaginative interest lies not in the life of Florence and Pisa and Verona, but in the gloomy series of descending circles of unending torture, or the fearful pits of the Malebolge Pool, and the sacred Mount of Pain and Purification between earth and lunar heaven, and the Rose of the Blessed into which the Dantean Paradise shapes itself. Nor does he make such strenuous but ineffectual attempts to bore deep into the world of divine Infinitude and pierce to the very heart the mystery of the

[1] In his 'Shakespeare's Predecessors in the English Drama,' 1884, 49.

universe and lay it bare, like Shelley, who—notwithstanding his energetic political propagandism in Ireland and elsewhere—is markedly wanting in a keen, rich, ever-active feeling for real transactions and purely human events, and who manifests an indifference to externals in comparison with that which is of the invisible life. And yet, who can fail to discover a certain affinity between Shakespeare and these great and ardent souls? Does he not betray at times something of their wistfulness, and pathos, and solemn intensity of spiritual desire?

IV.

Shakespeare's mind is sanely realistic; eminently positive and practical; founded on a solid basis of good sense. He views the world from a definite point of observation and sympathy; and is bent upon grasping and expressing the truth. He gloriously abounds in the fresh and exuberant life of his age; and represents the dominant forms of human life, the aspirations and ideals, deep-set or transient, of the English nation as a whole. He never abandons the poet's safeguards of the concrete, and has no pleasure in any imaginations, however splendid and impressive, which he cannot feel to be true. But still his dramas are large, spacious, idealistic; rich with the fulness of a sense of wonderful, half-known, extra-mundane things; and his genius is essentially explorative or mystery-piercing. The most precious part of his poetry is probably that which is least positive. He appeals less to the eye, indeed, than to the intuition. He aims much more to suggest than to describe; and over and above the merit of his particular discoveries, is the capital merit of being able by the severe, vivid, ardent force of his poetic vision to quicken speculation, to promote the circulation of lofty and fertilising ideas, and to compel the minds of men to combat and discussion.

What strikes me most, as I advance in my study of his mind and art, is not his technical readiness and dramatic tact, nor his sense of the sacredness of ascertained fact, nor his intellectual precision and definiteness in respect of the mass of real matter with which he deals—for these are qualities which he holds in

common with the best of his contemporaries; but the freedom and magnificent expansion and elemental grandeur of his genius, the largeness of his spiritual suggestion, the vastness of the vision of supernatural life which he opens up to us, the daring frankness of his verisimilitude, and the sublime and unflagging strength with which he attempts to disclose man in his primal elements and discover the springs or seeds, so to speak, of his moral being. Starting from the actual, he transcends it; and yet he keeps close to it in the very act of transcending it. Indeed, his foot is never more firmly planted in the actual than when he reaches it, as it were, from the side of the ideal. These are the points of greatness which no other poet even approaches. The supreme function of his art is to mediate between Man and Nature; to discern a new world beneath life's everyday appearances, and transmit it in his poetry to other minds; to disclose the infinite through the finite by idealisation and idealised reproduction. He possesses the power, in other words, of bringing the infinite into, and of evoking the infinite out of, common life.[1] And without some acquaintance of this fact, we go through Shakespeare with most imperfect comprehension of his aim, his method, and his habits of thought.

V.

Sheer inquisitiveness and meditativeness about all things whatsoever—this, then, is our poet's main interest in life. He is a close, curious, deeply contemplative observer from whom nothing is hid, nothing withholden; a metaphysician and psychologist of swift sensibility, who travels with the airy impersonality and the winged melodiousness of untrammelled genius through the pathless regions of human passion and human thought, and to whom nothing belonging to the moral or spiritual world that presents

[1] The following passage illustrates what has been written above: "If it (the Elizabethan drama) contains a divine element, the divine is to be looked for *in* the human, not apart from the human. It knows eternity only through time, which is a part of eternity."—Professor Dowden, 'Shakespeare: his Mind and Art,' 27.

itself for solution to his ever-analysing mind is too sacred or too contemptible for experiment and artistic handling. His eager, searching, comprehensive genius rushes breathlessly along the track of imaginative desire and transcends the petty limits of time and place. It penetrates the remotest recesses of human existence, fastens upon the rarer and more intense experiences of the souls of men, and lifts up into consciousness the deepest and profoundest things of the spiritual life. It masters all moods of thought and passion; it vivifies and interprets all aspects of nature; and, in moments of highest light and ardour, it connects and harmonises the visible universe—that mystery-bounded sphere of man placed midway between the upper and the nether world and liable to sudden and grievous incursions from both—with the whole unseen and everlasting realm of spirit. For our poet has momentary intuitions of things which eye hath not seen nor ear heard; and his imagination is so rich and so strong in binding and unifying power that it welds together the invisible and the visible, the spiritual causes and the earthly phenomena, and makes both subservient to the purposes of the heart.

VI.

And observe, in passing, the strange heights and depths to which his unchecked curiosity leads him; the foci towards which his sublimest conceptions of created things continually converge. It is in the third period of his art-life, and in the tentative tragic period of "Romeo and Juliet," that we naturally look for the most distinct and delicate manifestations of Shakespeare's inquisitiveness and meditativeness. For then it is that his mind is most seriously occupied with the deep insoluble questions suggested by human character and human fate. Then it is that he stands, steeped in meditation and possessed by a sense of mystery, before the tomb of the Capulets in which the "star-crossed" fate-conquered lovers of Verona lie immured; or bows his head, convinced of the frailty of human happiness and the futility of human love, by the bier of the bewrayed Ophelia, who,

in spite of what Goethe says of her in the famous "Hamlet" exegesis in 'Wilhelm Meister,' is indubitably the sweetest and purest and loveworthiest being at the Court of Elsinore; or watches, with pained constriction of heart, the sorrow-stricken Lear,—with all his impatient vanity and loose-handed weakness and despotism of self-worship, "a man more sinned against than sinning,"—treading day after day the same round of ineffable torture, sorrow and destruction following with immeasurable strides in the wake of error, and iniquity working continually forward, phasis after phasis, to the one inevitable issue of all-encompassing doom; or gazes, with sad disdainful smile, impressed by the meanness of human wishes and the poorness of human results, at the deathbed of the queenly harlot Cleopatra, that beautiful, brilliant, divinely wicked "serpent of old Nile," whose potency of enchantment does not seem to end with life, since the passionless Octavius, outcrafted by the force of her will and passion and the readiness of her woman's wit, just as her voluptuous full-souled paramour is bewitched by her time-defying beauty and ruined by the poison of her lascivious blandishments, exclaims over her breathless body—

> "She looks like sleep,
> As she would catch another Antony
> In her strong toil of grace."

Then it is, in a word, that Shakespeare with a master's hand touches those things that are unproven in religion or dubious in received opinion or obscure in human destiny; and casts his plummet into that measureless, deeply troubled, ever-moaning sea of sorrow and wrong and loss in which the storm-girt spirit-haunted sphere of man lies islanded.

In "Othello" and the imperishable masterpieces with which it is grouped, our poet looks down upon the whole of human experience from the height of his Olympian calm, with something of Antonio's pensive aloofness, but with nothing of Timon's bitterness, or impatience, or impassioned misanthropy,—as certain critics, Hallam among the number, would have us suppose—and endeavours to discover the spiritual significance of the great

tragic facts of the world, and the nature of those mysterious powers which dominate life and preside with infallible assurance and precision over the course of human events. He meditates profoundly on every topic of human concern; and studies with single-hearted sincerity the great mystery of iniquity. He tracks the footsteps of nature with the utmost care; follows with declared morality of purpose the movements of all ranks and conditions of men; and, with the equal eye and the sure touch of the pure artist, analyses and unfolds into clearness the moving springs of human action and the causes of man's failure and success. And so wide and deep is his sympathy with human action and human suffering, that in the case of Hamlet, who by indirection and infirmity of purpose is left stranded and helpless amid the wrecks of life, the godlike freshness and force of his aspiring nature crushed and down-trampled by brutal and tyrannous strength and the cold malignity of a world that turns and twists his sorrows and his virtues into crimes, he even interrogates the human spirit in its final place of judgment respecting the significance and aim, the mission and the goal, of man's life, and the share which his conscious will and foresight have in the shaping and controlling of earthly affairs. With smooth tranquillity of spirit, with equal interest and with equal ease, he sounds, with his imagination, the rayless depths of Timon's sceptical despair, and the romantic love-lit abysses of Juliet's tender, artless, all-believing soul; and, like his own Lear—that spiritual vivisectionist who would anatomise the heart of Regan to account for her filial ingratitude, the very thought of which gnaws him inly like a virulent acid—he attempts to pierce below the surface to the hidden recesses and the deadliest hollows of the inner life, that *we* may learn what is nestling and brooding there, and ripen into a perception of the momentous truth which is so sublimely illustrated and so solemnly enforced in "Othello" and "Macbeth," that in the searchless folds of *every* soul there lurks not only an aptitude for goodness but an aptitude for crime, not only a potential angel but a sleeping devil, "on whose nature," as Duke Prospero says in "The Tempest," "nurture can never stick."

VII.

Thus he investigates with curious scrutiny the ravening egoism and deep shamelessness of soul, the diabolical falsity and hell-inspired tact, so supreme and so triumphant, of that potent and invulnerable demi-devil Iago, who crosses us, from time to time, like some fearful preternatural and latent form of malignant evil, ever threatening to break out, as indeed he does, into a material and visible but motiveless vengeance. And with equal penetration and with equal interest he examines the heroic and magnanimous nature of the credulous Moor who is so easily caught in the snake-like folds of his "unimaginable snare"; lays bare that peccant part in his so "perfect soul" which, small at first as a grain of mustard-seed, is not too small to escape the notice of his lynx-eyed Ancient, and which, fostered and nourished by his devilish, unrelenting, inexhaustible arts, expands at length into an overshadowing upas-tree, whose pestiferous presence blights and blasts the bloom and sun-bright beauty of his wedded life. He studies and analyses the "blessed conditions" of the gentle Desdemona, whose trustful reverential love, and virtuous impressibility of heart, and mute and unresisting submissiveness of demeanour, are all besmirched and twisted by the cold impureness and the nimble wit of Iago into damning evidences of guilt, and who now lies smothered on the bridal bed; cruelly done to death by him who in the moment of his overwhelming joy had rashly pledged his life upon her faith, but who now affirms in the fearful climax of his "waked wrath,"—unable in his passion-blindedness to see or feel that an incorruptible, self-devoting, grandly enduring love could alone prompt her to stammer out with broken breath that sacred self-forgetting lie with which her sun-pure spirit takes its heavenward flight from the spotless temple of her body, and which is intended to save from the consequences of his own wrong-doing her "kind lord," who, alas! still believes that she is false and faded and defiled,—that "like a liar" she has "gone to burning hell." The tragic *nodus* in "Othello" is therefore wholly of a subjective character. The interest really centres not

in the immolation of a chaste and beautiful woman, but in the inward self-overmastering struggle that takes place in the hero's mind between hatred of sin and love of the fair creature whom at the bidding of Iago he treats as a sinner. This it is which stimulates Shakespeare's imagination and sharpens the edge of his curiosity.

VIII.

And this, I need hardly say, is no isolated case. In "Macbeth" the poet shows us the gashed and gory image of the gracious Duncan, he who has "borne his faculties so meek," who has been "so clear in his great office," lying in the guest-chamber beside the sleepy grooms with his white hair and silver skin dabbled in "his golden blood." This again is a sight calculated to wring the heart with pity, or freeze the blood with terror, or fire the soul with righteous indignation. But Shakespeare's interest does not centre in that. The *fundus* of the drama is to be found, of course, in the somewhat commonplace incident of Duncan's murder. But the central point of its spiritual import lies in the fact that it is his brave kinsman Macbeth who is the murderer—he who has been spoken of but a little while ago as "valour's minion," imbruing his hands in the blood of the sleeping king; "Bellona's bridegroom, lapp'd in proof," doing midnight murder to possess himself of sovereignty. The poet's mind dwells not so much on the mere social, national, *external* effects of this barbarous act; but on the terrible personal and *internal* revolution that in the instant is created in Macbeth's own nature. Duncan is in his wave-girdled grave at Iona. After life's fitful fever *he* sleeps well. You are content to leave the matter there; and almost forget, in the rapid and precipitate action that follows the murder-scene, his sudden and unshriven death. It is the after-events which bear down upon your heart and conscience with painful weight and tenacity.

Shakespeare would have you fix your gaze upon the regicide as he stands, struggling with conscience yet greedily drinking in the hell-thoughts of the Weird Sisters, at the pit of Acheron, so luridly made visible to the eyes of men; or rocking and reeling

like a drunken man beneath the stress of those fierce passions and "horrible imaginings" which fill his panic-stricken mind with such poignant anguish. From the moment of the murder Macbeth is a shattered, hag-ridden, miserable man; cut off for ever from the love and reverence of mankind, he grows heart-sick and world-weary. Too soon he finds that "fate and metaphysical aid," to which he trusted, are set against him; the juggling fiends have paltered with him in a double sense, have kept "the word of promise" to his ear but broken it to his hope; and he stands at last, environed by death and doom, bewailing the lost estate of his immortal soul, and acknowledging with bitter moans and broken breath the futility of murder as a means of advancement. The past is filled with horror, the present with daily and nightly misery, the future with heart-withering cares.

Shakespeare would also have you fix your gaze upon the wife-accomplice, the heartrending portraiture of whose state of mind is psychologically even more instructive than that of her husband,—an unparalleled masterpiece of dramatic skill.[1] He would have you observe how, bereft of hope and human sympathy, with remorse clutching continually at her heart-strings, she who was so high of heart, so firm of intellect, so magnificent in iniquity, and who towered above her brain-sickly husband in sheer resolve like the dauntless Clytemnestra over the weak-willed Ægisthus, is thrown into the chaos of madness; how in her somnambulism she takes a terrible retrospect of her own and her consort's villany, ruminates upon the horror and suspense of the murdering moment, repeats all the ghastly details of the sanguinary spectacle, and mourns with glazed eyes and bursting heart over that disgustful blood-spot which still seems to stain her little hands—hands that "all the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten," hands that all great Neptune's ocean will not cleanse—for she is borne down, even in her sleep-talking state, by an unsubduable sense of the irrevocableness of her crime; and thus furnishes the best illustration in all literature perhaps of the physical tangibleness of the moral law, and of the truth of that ethical doctrine so sternly enforced in the novels of George Eliot, of the dreadful

[1] See Dr J. C. Bucknill's Psychology of Shakespeare, 1859, 29.

vitality of deeds, and their indestructible life, *both in and out of consciousness.*

This self-propagating power of evil, or "fatal parthenogenesis," by which one sin for ever involves another, is the fact, then, on which the poet's curiosity fastens: this final permanence of moral character thus produced by these repeated acts of sin is the doctrine on which he so profoundly meditates.[1] Compared with this death-in-life, this judicial blindness produced by sin under irreversible natural law, which he investigates with curious scrutiny, Death itself has no terror. Better to be with the dead whom they have sent to rest that their lust of empire may be sated, than live on thus in a glacial and spectral world where every object seems to wear the colour of their crime and every noise appals them. Shakespeare does not lay much stress upon the fact that the meek-eyed Duncan shall sleep for ever; but that Macbeth, who has murdered the innocent asleep, who wanders with fettered activity, a doubt-ridden dupe, through the "rooky wood" of sorcerous temptation, *shall sleep no more.* He does not invite us to contemplate the extinction of a dynasty, but the ruin and loss of a human soul—a spectacle of greater ghastliness than death itself. Here again the objective genius is overridden by the subjective; "Macbeth" is also a drama of the interior, a spiritual history, a tragedy of the soul which enthrals the senses and imagination, and excites the deepest depths of the human heart. Here, as in "Othello," the poet delights in the psychological dissection and analysis of character; in tracing, stage by stage, the growth of evil in the human mind; in revealing the passions and interests, the deepest things and most secret parts, of the inner life of man.

In the serious, dark, ironical comedy of "All's Well that Ends Well," which was written in 1601, when Shakespeare's mood was growing earnest, when his thoughts were settling down upon the darkest and saddest parts of human life—when, in a word, he was just entering upon the great tragic period of his dramatic career, of which "Hamlet" (1602-3), "Othello" (1604), "Macbeth," and "King Lear" (1605-6) are the ripest and finest first-fruits—there

[1] See "Macbeth," Act i. sc. 5. ll 41-55; iii. 2. 55; iii. 4. 75-83; iii. 4. 136-140.

is a question started respecting that unprincipled, inexpressibly mean poltroon, the bragging French Captain Parolles, who, according to one of his waggish and sharp-sighted critics in the play, has "outvillained villainy so far, that the rarity redeems him," which somehow always associates itself in my mind with the poet's mighty delineation of Macbeth. "Is it possible he should know what he is," inquires the French lord in his perplexity, "and be that he is?" This, which sounds like an utterance of Shakespeare's own heart, is one of the deepest of questions. It influences Schiller when portraying in 'The Robbers' the cold, placid, irreclaimable perversity of Franz Moor, who has been described as an "amplified copy" of Iago. It abides with Victor Hugo through the whole of that wonderful chapter in "Les Misérables' entitled "Une tempête sons un crâne," which lays bare the wild tumult in the abysmal depths of Jean Valjean's brain when the ex-convict is debating whether he should deliver himself up to justice. It is present to the grand and sombre mind of Marlowe — to take an illustrious contemporary example — when he depicts the monstrous wickedness, the iron sternness, the untamable heart of Barabas in the demoniac drama of "The Jew of Malta." And one may perhaps be pardoned for supposing that Shakespeare allowed the question, thrown out as a mere aside or parenthesis in the Comedy, to take root in the rich warm soil of his mind, and that it gradually dilated, by the expansion of natural growth, as he penetrated farther and farther into the actual facts of spiritual life, into those complex problems of casuistry and of character which he states and enforces with such ethical grandeur, and solves, so far as they are solvable, in the great epic tragedy of "Macbeth."

One thing at least is certain, that the poet in the play of 1605 renders an explicit answer to the question propounded in the play of 1601. Kant says [1] that to feel compunction is inevitable on the remembrance of former sins. But not so Shakespeare. In his great tragedies he leaves us no room to doubt that conscience may cease to exist or act in the incorrigibly evil. There is such a thing, he would say, as inveteracy of sin involving com-

[1] See The Metaphysic of Ethics (Semple's, 3d edition, 1871), 305.

plete judicial blindness; so that men, dropping their "clear judgments" in their "own filth," gradually come to *adore their errors*, as "the ne'er-lust-wearied" Antony himself observes. According to the Shakespearian ethic it is possible for a man to remember his sins without compunction; to regard his utter unworthiness with supreme indifference. Sin by custom grows into nature; into that final permanence of free evil character depicted in the incurably vitiated nature of Claudius, who *cannot* repent, and in the ingrained perversity of Richard, who *will not*. Thus, like some spell-bound victim of Greek Atè, "sliding open-eyed on the descent to hell," Macbeth struts onwards to his own eternal confusion with quick unerring tread, and remorseless, even prideful consciousness of his manifold iniquities, even after the secret, black, and midnight hags have shown him apparitions that foretell his speedy overthrow, images of crowned kings that fully realise those fears that stick so deep in Banquo's issue.

Face to face with hell, convinced of its reality by the nameless spirits he has evoked, Macbeth may curse the witches, imprecate the winds whereon they ride, and damn all those that trust them. But he will not arrest himself in his deeds of blood. He is of another mettle. The lust for sovereignty has passed into a bewildering lust for blood; and he who has brushed away like summer flies all those who stood between his dearest wish and its fruition, will now still and stifle the pungent prickings of conscience, and recover fresh strength to sin and suffer. He is so far steeped in blood that to go backward were as hard as to go on. Wherefore the mind he sways by, and the heart he bears, shall never sag with doubt, nor shake with fear. He sneers away the ruin of his soul in cynical epigrams and unholy hypotheses founded on the soul-blinding predictions of the Weird Sisters on the blasted heath. He repudiates and rejects the old Roman refuge of stoic suicide, and with arrogant intrepidity resolves to die with harness on his back. The urge of evil passion has always been strenuous with him; now it is redoubled in force and dull ferocity. Having massacred in the inner realm every pure desire and holy motive, he bends "each corporal agent" to more terrible feats, and for the moment his nature becomes firmer, more massive and resilient.

To be "baited by the rabble's curse" is a dreadful prospect to a distempered mind that has "supp'd full with horrors"; but it is one that only tends to make him more remorseless still, to give a fresh impulse to his "slaughterous thoughts," and urge him along the course upon which he has already entered.

This is what he says as he comes out of the gloomy cavern where he has seen the ghost of the "blood-boltered Banquo," and the show of shadowy kings, and those ominous apparitions whose childish diableries harp his fears aright:—

> "Time, thou anticipatest my dread exploits:
> The flighty purpose never is o'ertook
> Unless the deed go with it: from this moment
> The very firstlings of my heart shall be
> The firstlings of my hand. And even now,
> To crown my thoughts with acts, be it thought and done:
> The castle of Macduff I will surprise;
> Seize upon Fife; give to the edge o' the sword
> His wife, his babes, and all unfortunate souls
> That trace him in his line. No boasting like a fool;
> This deed I'll do before this purpose cool."

In this monologue we see the combat of his passion and his conscience; the cruel down-trampling of the one by the emphasis and stress of the other; the ecstasy of the maniac-murderer with whom the impulse to kill forms itself into a fixed idea and habit.

It is clear, then, that at the date of "Macbeth" our poet rises to a perception of the great truth that a man may know, and even acknowledge with the sinister sincerity of an Iago, or an Edmund, or a Richard, the execrable vileness of his own nature, and yet unconcernedly persist in his antagonism to virtue. He does not shrink from the conclusion, demonstrable by the widest induction, that final permanence of evil character with a will that is absolutely free does not involve a psychological self-contradiction; —a point on which something more definite falls to be said in a subsequent chapter. In short, this delineation of Macbeth most powerfully illustrates Shakespeare's dramatic conception of a sin-blind soul gazing, so to speak, on the visible torment and inevitable fate of the damned, and yet persisting in its own desire.

In this drama, as in "Othello," we have a signal example of the success with which the pensive curiosity of the poet investigates, and the sinewy sternness with which his hand traces, the indelible and everlasting signs of a damned conscience.

IX.

Now let me give one more instance of Shakespeare's penetrative reflection, untiring curiosity, and high suggestion. Look at the most Æschylean of his productions, "King Lear," which certain critics claim as his greatest work, and speak of as the highest specimen of what is aptly styled the Gothic Drama. In this tragedy the line of demarcation between good and evil is less clearly marked than in "Othello" and "Macbeth." Everything is strange, confused, distorted, and unhinged. In the vigorous words of Gloucester, "love cools, friendship falls off, brothers divide; in cities, mutinies; in countries, discords; in palaces, treason; and the bond cracked between son and father. This villain of mine comes under the prediction: there's son against father; the king falls from the bias of nature: there's father against child. And the noble and true-hearted Kent banished! his offence, honesty! Strange! strange!" The bonds of nature and society are thus rudely broken up; the sacredness of life and the sanctity of love are impiously profaned; and a wild unbridled malignancy, that rages and riots like a tempest in the world, defeats and triumphs over goodness in the end.

There is but one ray of pure heaven to be seen struggling through the worse than Dantean gloom which enshrouds the feverish, faultful, fiendish life of man in this grim and ghastly demon empire so luridly made visible to mortal eyes in "Lear." Cordelia, whose bland and beautiful countenance, shining with mild splendour like the glory-smitten angel-faces in the pictures of Fra Angelico, almost reminds one of "the light which shone in the darkness, and the darkness which comprehended it not," realises for us that sublime ideal of the ancient pagan faith which dimly saw "in a maiden's purity the link between God and her

race." Others may bow their head to the blast; but she will hold hers erect, and brave the beating of the pitiless storm that rages round her. Others, even Lear himself, may make terms with the usurpers, may dissimulate at times their disappointment and disapproval; but neither for fear nor favour will Cordelia, strong in the ardour and energy of her youth, glad in the consciousness of her own pure zeal and rectitude of will, consent to hide for a single instant her deep and enduring abhorrence of her kite-like sister's wickedness, or to check the divine workings of filial piety in her soul, albeit she may not wrong her own truth or do violence to her own nature, which can "love and be silent," by feeding her father's dotage and impatient vanity with those verbal protestations of affection for which he has such a morbid craving. This injured princess, so great in her sadness, so holy in her wrath, so benignant in life and so beautiful in death, is a type of virginal sanctity and pure redeeming ardour, of high feminine resolution and steadfastness in duty, for which we can only hope to find a parallel in the grandly developed and imposing figure of that "noblest of Grecian girls," the holy-hearted Antigone of Sophocles, although it seems to me that the daughter of the sightless Theban, whilst her equal in virtue, is inferior to Cordelia in tender pity and grave hope.

But what avails it that her heart is pure, her love heroic, her purpose errorless and steadfast? Heaven and earth seem leagued against her from the first. Cordelia, "the brotherless Antigone of our stage," is able to assuage, to reconcile, to fortify; to do and to dare and to die grandly; but she is unable to counterplot the craft and cunning of that vast confederacy of evil which hems her round. Her wrath cannot measure itself against the "plaited cunning" that disturbs her peace. Her mild magnanimity and tender love cannot overcome the stubborn contumacy of Cornwall and Edmund, or the preternatural malice of Regan and Goneril. And if we judge merely by external fortune, even her filial piety and unmurmuring patience cannot move those strong rulers of the world, whose assistance and co-operancy she invokes in her deeds of love and healing, to vindicate her goodness and save it from defeat. Her passion-prompted monitions and appeals to those

around her are answered by a viperous hiss from the barbed tongue of Regan, or a bitter taunt from the envenomed lips of the stony-hearted Goneril, or a curse from the father's heart that should have sheltered her. And her pathetic invocations to the opposeless gods who show no mercy for human frailty, no pity for human suffering, and whose policies seem to lean with favour only towards the winning side—for the central idea of all heathen speculation, the *Victrix causa Diis placuit* sentiment, is here dominant—remain unheeded and unanswered. She too drifts to destruction, and is sucked down at last into the deep-whirling vortex of death and doom. She makes war against the sister-fiends, "not for ambition, but a dear father's right"; suffers an irretrievable defeat; and is conveyed to the prison where soon after she meets her death at the hands of the mercenary murderer of the bastard Edmund, dropping as she goes those words, expressive of her self-forgetting love and calm fortitude of soul—

> "We are not the first
> Who, with best meaning, have incurr'd the worst.
> For thee, oppressed king, am I cast down;
> Myself could else out-frown false fortune's frown."

No sadder image of human life and human fate could be conceived than that which the story of "King Lear" presents. It is a dark and dreadful vision of chaotic misery, of inexpiable errors and unrepented crimes, of sufferings that are voiceless and inexplicable, of sorrows that are hopeless, reliefless, and eternal. "We look upward and downward, and in vain, into the deepest things of Nature, into the highest things of Providence; to the roots of life, and to the stars; from the roots that no God waters, to the stars which give no man light; over a world full of death and life, without resting-place or guidance."[1] For Edgar's loyalty to right is but a desperate and effectless instinct after all. Kent's passionate and unmingled devotion is unrequited, if unquenched. Even Lear's blazing miseries and inexplicably mysterious sufferings, it would seem, are unproductive as they are immitigable; and the blameless love that fills the heavenly soul of Cordelia her-

[1] Swinbourne, A Study of Shakespeare, 1880, 171.

self is spilled, like precious wine, in the dust. The earth is dark and blood-stained; a beamless region of perpetual night—"a land of darkness, as darkness itself, and where the light is as darkness;" a world in which human frailty meets no mercy and human longing finds no hope. Life is sin-smitten, wretched, vain; and man's highest hope is to escape from it as soon and as quietly as he can. Justice, atonement, mercy, repentance, peace,—these are to him meaningless words, since Humanity preys upon itself "like monsters of the deep"; and the presence of death seems to suggest to him nothing but oblivion and decay. An undiscriminating vengeance falls upon the race; and for the gentle and the just, no less than for the basest and the blackest of beings, there is no hope of a future world, no expectation of a higher existence. Man begins and ends his life here with a sharp cry of pain and a wail of inextinguishable grief. So that the closing words of the quick, fiery, strong-nerved Earl, who is so bound up in the fate and fortunes of the king and his daughter that their death soon "plucks him after," seem to strike the proper chord:—

> "Break, heart; I prithee, break! . . .
> Vex not his ghost: O, let him pass! He hates him much
> That would upon the rack of this tough world
> Stretch him out longer."

The interest of the drama, and it is overwhelmingly great, centres in Cordelia and her father,—albeit its basis is enlarged, its effect heightened, its moral mystery augmented by the subordinate story of Gloucester and his sons, which is taken from an episodical chapter in the 'Arcadia' of Sir Philip Sidney, just as the main incidents of the leading plot are derived from the 'Chronicle' of Holinshed,—whilst the terrible events which form its tragic colouring matter may be said to spring from a single error of the choleric old king, the responsibility for which, however, is shared in some degree by Cordelia herself, whose tardiness of disposition or addiction to reticence of feeling when Lear makes the trial of professions cannot be regarded as altogether blameless. For the whole tragedy would have been rendered impossible by the utterance of a single word expressive of the real state of her

feelings instead of that twice-repeated "Nothing" which Coleridge regards as indicative of pride and sullenness, but which I rather prefer to regard as indicative of an invincible shyness of character or virgin delicacy of spirit that prevents her from heaving "her heart into her mouth" and expressing by direct words the depth and sincerity of her feelings. Just as it is the silent grief that "whispers the o'erfraught heart, and bids it break," so here it is the silent love that is deepest, truest, most enduring. And her "single waywardness" in not conciliating her fond and foolish father by gently yielding to his restless, extravagant, most exacting affection, although in strict speech a fault, is yet a fault that only heightens our regard for her character, like the heroic disobedience of Antigone, whose silence, it may be noted, provokes Creon to execute his tyrannical threats quite as much as her subsequent invectives. Cordelia is a noble and beautiful impersonation of the tenderness and holiness of womanhood, of heroic constancy and strength in suffering. But her character, with all its heaven-born attributes, is not flawless and immaculate. And this solitary fault, this modifying trait, so human and so feminine, redeems it from that charge of perfection which cannot, I think, be applied with strict propriety to any one less truly divine than the Theban maiden of the Sophoclean tragedy, who is sprung from demigods and impeccable like them.

For my present purpose the salient facts of this terrific masterpiece may be reproduced in a brief space. Lear divides his kingdom and divests himself of all for his offsprings' sake. In a fury of resentment, during the trial of professions, he banishes from his realms the faithful Kent, who has resisted in unmeasured terms the rashness and injustice of the doting king; and strangers with his curse his favourite daughter, who will not join in the fulsome flatteries and coaxing speeches of her hollow-hearted sisters, but will love her father according to her bond, no more nor less. Then he takes to his bosom these "pelican daughters," whom he invests with all the power, revenue, and execution of government; and becomes entangled, almost before he knows it, in a net of vile intrigue from which death alone provides an avenue of escape. His soul is at once beset and beleaguered by

the black and subtle crimes of those foul, intractable, Menadic hags, Regan and Goneril; and the more he struggles to get free the more he gets engaged. He is involved in darkness: a Titan at war with demons, unable to cope with the obdurate selfishness, the artful dexterity, the cunning activity of malice of these wolf-fanged sister-fiends.

And observe how Shakespeare gives us, with all the clearness and distinctness of successive impressions, the varied phases of suffering through which this child-wounded and child-changed father is fated to pass; and shows us how "the threefold dignity of a king, an old man, and a father" is dishonoured and despised by the ingratitude and malignancy of his unnatural daughters—the direct result of his own self-blinding vanity and despotism of self-will. We see him deposed from royalty, stripped of his kingly dignities, subjected to cruel reproaches and unfilial insults, and given up a prey to naked helplessness. We see him a "poor, infirm, weak, and despised old man," dismissed into the tempest and the night to hovel in the straw with Tom o' Bedlam, or wander aimlessly upon the heath with the babbling, wild, but affectionate Fool, who, amidst the raging of the elements, with forced mirth and lyrical outflowings of raillery and simulated joy, more piteous to hear than sighs and sobs, "labours to outjest his heart-struck injuries." Broken, helpless, and defeated by the apostacy and treason of his daughters, crushed to earth by the stunning blows of unparalleled reverses and misfortunes, we hear the white-haired sufferer, "mad as the vex'd sea," preaching misanthropy in the midst of the tempest, or pouring lunatic morality into the sympathetic ear of his poor boy, who has much pined away since his "young lady's going into France," or importuning the heavens, "as they themselves are old," to compassionate his sorrows and avenge his wrongs; and see him in the very monsoon of his raving misery beating wildly at his head—"the gate which let his folly in" and his dear judgment out. Then we see the poor pariah king "crown'd with rank fumiter and furrow weeds," wandering about the fields near Dover and at last turning in the confusion of his care-crazed mind to the holy-hearted Cordelia, who aforetime was "strangered with his oath," but whose loving

bosom now shields and shelters him in his dire distress. He, with reason reclaimed from the drear void of lunacy, and with "faculties touched into order and peace by the voice of filial sympathy," revokes the undeserved paternal imprecation; she, with her invincible loyalty and boundless devotion of love, stands forth the one true daughter who by her patient and duteous tenderness, forgiveness, and divine compassion

> "Redeems Nature from the general curse
> Which twain have brought her to."

And then, in that last scene, so full of mystery and mourning, we reach the boundary and terminus of Lear's suffering. There is probably nothing more tragically moving in all Shakespeare than this scene. We see the panic-stricken king as he enters from the castle, bearing in his shrunken and nerveless arms the cold limp body of the dead Cordelia, hanged by a slave at the bidding of the base-born Edmund. We watch him as he applies the feather that is never fluttered and the stone that is never stained to the blanched and breathless lips of the fair-faced girl over whom he bends with doting fondness; as he alternates between fear and faith, and passes from "agitating doubts" to "wishful unbelief" of her death, now yielding to the false hope that is born of an excited fancy, and again sinking under the pitiless burden of quite unvisionary fact; as he proclaims at last the failure of those pathetic experiments on the lifeless corpse in that ear-cleaving cry of fierce imperious anguish wrung from his broken and rebellious heart by the imperative pressure of bitter, unavoidable, and unalterable truth:—

> "A plague upon you, murderers, traitors all!
> I might have saved her; *now she's gone for ever!*"

Shakespeare, it will be seen, spares us nothing either of the spiritual or the physical torment of his hero. He conducts us through all the dark and fiery depths of human pain and mortal passion, even as Virgil led Dante through the circles of Hell. As a tragic poet it is his primary purpose to purge and purify the human heart by pity and by terror. Sorrow, he well knows, is

the nurse of virtue; the one human passion that through immeasurable suffering was once and for ever made divine. And therefore, whilst by no means insensible to his anguish, Shakespeare exhibits with curious complacency, vividly, dispassionately, and in detail, all the most deeply moving aspects of sorrow and of strife in the death-scene of the suffering Lear. The woful spectacle is made present to us. The description lives. We see and feel it all: the perplexed mixtures of passion and the action and reaction of combining and contending powers—such as love, anger, pride, meekness, grief, defiance, all mingled and melted into each other in the fierce and fluent speech of the stricken king; and the swift and sudden changes of expression in his pale pinched face, so furrowed by age and by cruelty, so blemished by calamity and care,—surprise, doubt, hope, expectation, fear; then blank amazement and the dull moodiness of a voiceless and undecipherable woe—

> "A stifled, drowsy, unimpassioned grief,
> Which finds no natural outlet, no relief,
> In word, or sigh, or tear."[1]

And with what consummate art does the poet reveal the final mental and physical traces of Lear's long agony. The wild and wayward anger that first found vent in those fierce words of wailing—

> "Howl, howl, howl, howl! O, you are men of stones:
> Had I your tongues and eyes, I'ld use them so
> That heaven's vault should crack. She's gone for ever!"—

is suddenly submerged by sorrow; lost in the overflowing tenderness of his sore-saddened heart, which voices itself in that piteous panting cry of agonised yearning and regret—

> "*Cordelia, Cordelia! stay a little.* Ha!
> What is't thou say'st? Her voice was ever soft,
> Gentle, and low, an excellent thing in woman."[2]

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[1] These lines form part of a singularly pathetic utterance in the second stanza of Coleridge's autobiographical ode entitled "Dejection."

[2] Compare "Romeo and Juliet," iv. 3. 57. It is worth remark that this passionate reiteration of the loved one's name is often adopted by Shakespeare

Then there is the death-boding sign of dim-sightedness—

> "Who are you?
> *Mine eyes are not o' the best:* I'll tell you straight. . . .
> *This is a dull sight.* Are you not Kent?"

By these words Shakespeare denotes not merely defective eyesight, a result due to age and care and grief, but that ever-deepening dimness of vision which is the inevitable precursor of death; the gathering mist which, "beginning at the heart," as Dr Bucknill remarks, "weakens the circulation through the brain and dims the sight." From this point the tragedy hastens to a close. A few sharp and subtle touches of natural realism complete a picture of surpassing vividness and strength. The poet shows us how Lear passes from the stressful fivefold "Never," which marks the growing excitement of purely mental suffering or the wild incoherence of despairing insanity, to the mild and courteous request of the one last lucid moment, "Pray you, undo this button," which betokens the utter prostration of his worn-out nature, the heart swelling under the oppression of grasping and griping sorrows, and the increasing difficulty of drawing dying breath—perhaps the most perfect piece of pathetic realism to be found in English poetry: one of those simple but effective touches "of which only Shakespeare ever knew the secret"[1]—and then, with one long yearning look cast on the pallid upturned face of her whom he has found only to lose for ever, quits his hold of life. We see him softly but surely sliding from his "eminence of care" on the solid rock of mortal life into that vague and shadowy sea of mystery which lies around the known sphere of human destiny—"the world not realised," towards which the death-filmed eyes are sadly turned; from which the sweet Cordelia would seem even now to beckon and call him—

> "Do you see this? Look on her,—look,—her lips,—
> Look there, look there!"

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as a means of increasing the piteousness and pathos of a speech, or of heightening the effect of a situation. See "Othello," v. 1. 76, 77, and 84; ibid., v. 2. 281; "Antony and Cleopatra," iv. 9. 23.

[1] See Lowell's essay on "Dryden" in 'My Study Windows' (ed. 1886), 284.

The eye of sense, overclouded with death, cannot distinguish her; but the eye of faith, smitten for the moment with heavenly brightness, sees her in all this distance; and the thirst of his soul seems quenched. At last the stormful heart has ceased to beat. The cord is loosed, and the bowl is broken. The winds cease, and there is a great and solemn calm.

Now, what is it that gives peculiar force to the presentation of life in this sublime tragedy? Coleridge on this point affirms that "King Lear" is the only serious performance of Shakespeare, the interest and situations of which "are derived from the assumption of a gross improbability." And the justice and truth of this remark cannot be gainsaid. Nevertheless, the men and women, the emotions and passions and sentiments, the main incidents of the leading action and of the secondary plot, with all the interdependent episodes of the play, belong to the permanent elements of society and the permanent facts of human life. With their joyous instincts and simple passions and vivid sense of the multitudinous life of nature, the contemporaries of Homer or Æschylus or Sophocles might perhaps have found it difficult to understand the melancholy of a Hamlet or the misanthropy of a Timon. But every character, passion, and event in this dark drama of Nemesis, from the unbridled malignancy of Regan to the magnificent lunacy of Lear; from the unmingled loyalty and desperate fidelity of Kent to the reptilian meanness and sycophantic servility of that "serviceable villain" Oswald, the weak-kneed time-serving steward of Queen Goneril; from the active and enduring virtue of Edgar to the nimble wit and energetic wickedness of Edmund; from the unsubduable filial piety of Cordelia to the inspired babblings and grotesque levity and the pity-moving eccentricities of genius displayed by the broken-hearted Fool, — so happily described by Hudson as "the soul of pathos in a sort of comic masquerade,"— would probably have been quite as intelligible to them as to us. And this for the obvious reason that as a tragedy of passion it deals frankly and fully with the most familiar facts of actual life. The relation of father and children, the sin of ambition, the vice of ingratitude, the virtue of filial affection, the terrible vitality of evil deeds, and the inevitable consequences of headlong impulse and

criminal intrigue ;—these are the things which form the tragic colouring matter of the drama and greatly arouse the curiosity of Shakespeare.[1]

But the tragedy of "King Lear" includes much more than this. It is not merely the story of a sorrowing old man, or the doom of suffering on a soul above a certain strain—a soul, in the words of the play, "more sinned against than sinning." Still less is it the accidental death of a wronged and noble daughter in the bloom and beauty of her youth at the very moment of reunion, or the stupendous spiritual agony that results from this sorrowful mischance. The theme of the drama is the implication of a noble mind in the intrigues and malignities of a world it has virtually renounced by the partition of the kingdom—for surely that event is of itself suggestive of a settled indisposition to the cares and labours of kingship—and its ultimate ruin through yielding first to an indiscriminate and loose-handed generosity and then to an unreasoning impulse of impatient vanity and imperious self-will.

What appals us is not so much the fierce, eager, unbridled malice of Regan, or the calm, pitiless, resolute cruelty of Goneril, but the unproductive anguish of him against whom the malignant forces of these terrible creatures are ruthlessly directed, without misgiving and without remorse. What purges our passions with pity and terror is not the sad and solemn images of suffering, of decay and ruin which abound in the play, but the fact that the poet who chooses to sound the very deepest abysses of human nature drops a pall of aboriginal darkness upon this mystery of inscrutable woe at the very moment when, through the tender ministries of Cordelia's pure redeeming love, something like restorative resurrection is promised to the ruined, care-crazed nature of the death-stricken Lear. What our minds are made to dwell upon is not the physical effects but the moral causes of human action: not so much the magnitude and sublimity of Lear's sufferings and sorrows, which may be said to surround him with a sort of supernatural atmosphere, but the constitutional obstinacy or unyielding exercise of will by which all the leading characters,

[1] See an article entitled "Shakespeare and George Eliot" in 'Blackwood' for April 1883, 529.

good and bad alike, are relentlessly swayed, and which eventually brings about the great catastrophe by the absolute ruin of both parties.

This it is which forms the principle of moral unity that controls the entire action of the leading *personæ*. They mutually contribute, by the irrational exercise of unguided self-will, to bring about the culminant catastrophe.[1] But here, as in the 'Antigone,' the crisis really lies in the character of the protagonist. We have for the central interest the titanic figure of Lear himself. In him we discover the practical centre or focus of the poet's meaning, and the true *locus* of the tragedy. The manifold afflictions of the king are for the most part self-generated and self-nourished. Heraud has rightly noticed that the blemishes of his daughters are but mirrors of his own; the basis for which deliverance is to be found in the self-condemning exclamation of Lear himself—

> "Judicious punishment! *'twas this flesh begot*
> *Those pelican daughters.*"[2]

His present sorrow, in other words, is simply the heritage of his past error: the result of his credulity and impatience, his overbearing egotism and despotism of self-worship. In this respect he bears a strong resemblance to the great hero of the Attic stage. Foolish and insolently rash from the beginning as ever was the Theban king in the Sophoclean tragedy, Lear provokes his own fate and perishes through his own fault. In short, it is due to his ethical state that his physical position is what it is.[3]

And hence it follows that Lear's soul is purged and purified of pride and passionate wilfulness by a long discipline of pain and privation before it is rescued and restored by the pure zeal, the

[1] This applies to the secondary plot as well as to the primary story; and thus the play is by general consent regarded as one of the most signal examples of unity in dramatic construction and ethical purpose. On this point Charles Cowden Clarke writes: "The play of 'King Lear' is a practical example of the calamities resulting from unbridled unguided self-will. 'Will,' independent of, and irresponsible to, justice and rationality, is the pivot upon which turn all the disasters that befall its leading characters."—Shakespeare Characters: Chiefly those Subordinate, 1863, 167, also 169.

[2] Compare Edgar's speech in Act v. scene 3, ll. 170-173.

[3] See J. A. Heraud, Shakespeare: His Inner Life, 1865, 299, 300.

redeeming ardour, the invigorating love of Cordelia, who shows, like Desdemona, "that life to be the highest which is a conscious voluntary sacrifice"; a sacrifice not of worldly substance, but of personal convictions and personal desires, of ardent hopes and private passions—a high renunciation of self, made with undivided will at the prompting of conscience and in the pure ardour of a perfect love that proves its fulness and reality by its silence and majestic tranquillity. His misconduct, the result of misruled affections, is not, and cannot be, cancelled. But it may be, and is, corrected by accumulated misfortunes. The sacredness of Law is maintained. The failure and futility of Rebellion is affirmed. And Lear is restored to an attitude of noble and repentant simplicity. Revenge gives way wholly to pity and remorse. Weak, helpless, and downtrodden, there is less of resentment against the ghoul-like sisterhood in his later declamation than of self-condemnation for his outrageous treatment of Cordelia. He forgets the wrongs he has suffered in the bitter remembrance of the wrong he has done. He can easier pardon even Regan's tiger-like fury or Goneril's cruel crimes than his own blindness, fatuity, and excess.

Stripped of all the artificial lendings of his crushed majesty, and plunged into unimaginable depths of neglect and misery; a comfortless, houseless, "unaccommodated man," wandering on the storm-swept heath with body bared to the pitiless "extremity of the skies," ineffectually struggling with Nature in her sternest moods, and vainly striving in "his little world of man" to outscorn the soulless elements, the arrogant old despot is made to bemoan, when the strength of his burning passion is spent, the folly of a false trust, to recognise the worthlessness of "titles blown from adulation," to feel compassion for the misfortunes of others, and to learn the preciousness of true love. In the midst of the storm the shivering king discovers that instead of being a master at whose nod all things must bow, he is a sport even of the warring wind and the ruthless rain. The terrible eloquence of his curses is drowned in the wild unresting roar of elemental nature. The physical tempest triumphs in the end over his desperate defiance and rude despotism of will. His pompous vanity and self-love, his fiery indignation and reckless unchained passions, yield to the

"tyranny of the open night," with its quick cross lightning and its deep dread-bolted thunder that will not peace at his bidding. Lear's nature, drenched and storm-battered by the "to and fro conflicting wind and rain," is plainly not ague-proof; and his ruined and unbonneted majesty is therefore forced on such a night as this—a night

> "Wherein the cub-drawn bear would couch,
> The lion, and the belly-pinched wolf
> Keep their fur dry"—

to seek shelter from the bitter blast with loathsome swine, and rogues forlorn, in short and musty straw, in a wretched hovel on the heath. The art of his "necessities is strange, that can make [such] vile things precious." Thus the physical storm exerts a salutary influence upon the moral nature of the king. Lear has "ever but slenderly known himself," as his daughters declare with brutal bluntness; and this is at once the supreme moment of revelation and retribution. "Is man no more than this?" he cries, as he violently unstrips himself and sets at nought all social restraints; thus pointing and making good, under the most tragic circumstances, the pithy description of another king of Shakespeare's making: "I think the king is but a man, as I am . . . . . the element shows to him as it doth to me; all his senses have but human conditions; his ceremonies laid by, in his nakedness he appears but a man."[1] The loss of his social position, his outcast suffering, his remorse and broken-heartedness, his pitiful and unaided collision with the malignant forces and unchained horrors of Nature;—these are the things which tend to bring back for a brief space the erring misled spirit of Lear to something like reason and a consciousness of the concrete facts of human life.

With godlike equity of judgment, then, Shakespeare portrays the king as in part delivered from his unbecoming asperity and tetchy waywardness, his restless egoism and impetuous vindictiveness, by means of a great catastrophe of suffering and death. He passes from our sight conscious of his calamitous error, and with an agonised clinging to the deep, real, silent love which aforetime

[1] "King Henry V.," Act iv., scene 1, l. 104 *seqq.*

in his ignorance he had impiously spurned and forsworn. Having made a genuine discovery of human goodness, having shown signs of a capacity for clear and sane self-knowledge, and learned at last that such a thing as true unselfish love exists in the world, he enters upon new spheres of activity and discipline. Like the great Greek tragedian with Œdipus, our poet has recourse here to a religious procedure, of which there are three distinctly defined stages of development to be noticed. There is first the process of purification, effected by the awful ordeal of pain and passion through which he is compelled to pass. Then there is the deliverance and restoration of the care-clouded brain and child-wounded soul, "through the sacred balm of a daughter's love." And, finally, there is the consecration of the aged and weary hearted Lear in death. It might almost be said that the apotheosis and the martyrdom of the eponymous hero of the poem are one. To use his own words when speaking of the captive Queen Cordelia, it is "upon such sacrifices" alone that "the gods themselves throw incense." This is the spiritual motive that controls the tragedy. This is the supreme fact in the field of vision on which Shakespeare's curiosity fastens; the chief centre of interest for his imagination and for ours.

X.

It has been remarked by most critics of "King Lear" that special stress is put upon the fact that the story is laid in heathen times; long before the country possessed anything like authentic history or even genuine traditions. And Professor Dowden conjectures that in thus departing from the lines of the story as originally dramatised in the old 'Chronicle History of King Leir'—a story derived from fabulous monkish chronicles of Britain, but as reverently believed, perhaps, in the earlier days of our literature as ever was that of Œdipus or Priam in the corresponding epoch of Grecian art—the poet was influenced by the idea "that he might be able to put the question boldly, 'What are the gods?'" This surmise, which finds favour with Schlegel, would also seem to

affect the criticism of Gervinus, who, with his usual acuteness and good sense, observes that the immoderate and unbridled desires, the malignant and uncontrolled passions, of the principal *personæ* are explainable by the fact that they know of no inward moral principle by which the power of the blood can be checked or broken; and then he adds: "All, and especially the best, with fatalistic feeling attribute the acts of men to the influence of nature and the stars; eclipses of the sun and moon bring, according to Gloucester's opinion, these frightful scourges of humanity; and to the true-hearted Kent the different dispositions of Lear's daughters are a proof that not education, not inherited blood, but the blind stars 'govern the conditions' of men."

It would almost seem, therefore, that the problem which looms darkly before Shakespeare's mind is precisely that suggested by the brief epic cry of the play itself: Is there "any cause in nature that makes these hard hearts?" A profoundly human question which, rising like a childish sob or spasm of bewildered sorrow from the shadowed heart and sunless mind of Lear, is recast in the measured and steadfast tones of deliberate thought in the later tragedy of "Timon of Athens," in which the views and principles of life here set forth are continued and farther developed. It is a question which presents itself for solution to Shakespeare's mind when engaged in the composition of "Othello"; and it is indubitably one which never fails in certain moods of distress and dejection to find or create an answering power and sympathy within our own bosoms, when we remember the incapacity and ignobleness and motiveless revenges of mankind, the vileness and cruelty and utter despicableness to which humanity may be moulded, and the variety and immensity of needless suffering that is diffused through life.

CHAPTER III.

THE SPIRITUAL NATURE OF SHAKESPEARE'S ART-IDEAL.

I.

THE preceding chapter will have discovered to the reader that the art-ideal of our poet is, as Gervinus has rightly noticed, essentially of a spiritual nature. His chief interest is in moral and psychological truth. His curiosity is mainly directed to the inner mysteries of human life. At this period, the period of "Hamlet" and "Macbeth" and "Othello," it may be said indeed that the metaphysical mood is to Shakespeare the most essentially and specifically human of all moods. Having writhed and suffered under a sense of the evil and falsehood, the baseness and injustice, the ingratitude and calumny of the world around him—let the self-betraying "Sonnets" witness—the poet sets himself in the great series of dramatic writings composed between 1602 and 1608 not to solve or explain, but to lay bare in all their terrific nudity, certain facts of existence whose mysteriousness he feels more keenly perhaps than other men, but which even he, with all his vast powers of thought and expression, is obliged to pronounce inscrutable. He writes from the very depths of an agonised heart. And just as Dante wrote "Inferno" because in a certain sense he felt Inferno, even so Shakespeare writes these Tragedies because in some measure he feels the influence of those mysteries and mighty passions which give colour and character to them.

In this connection I shall content myself with a single example;

one which illustrates the strength and pertinacity of his sympathies with matters of contemporary belief. In at least five of the ten plays which belong to this period, we find Shakespeare dealing with questions relating to supernaturalism. These are "Julius Cæsar," "Hamlet," "Othello," "Macbeth," and "King Lear." In all of these dramas, which appeal primarily to the supernatural moral judgment, the poet not only struggles face to face with the sternest realities of the inner life, but "treads on the confines of other worlds," and battles with those questions relating to ghosts and devils—the chief irruptions of the invisible or supernatural into the sphere of sixteenth-century man—which were current in his time. And not only does his poetic sense of mystery fasten on such elementary sublimities as those just mentioned; but his clear, penetrating, singularly exact and independent intellect would even seem to assent at times to that theory of the malign and unbending influence of unseen forces and supernatural beings upon the whole course of nature and life which had a pre-eminent power over the human imagination in the Elizabethan age.

In his sublime presentations of life, with all their wide and various tragic issues, there arise certain primary questions in which his passion for mystery takes relief. May not a man struggling with pure motives, not after natural happiness but after supernatural right, be deceived by divine yet contradictory voices, and abused and misled by darker powers? This is the solemn question that is started in "Hamlet." May he not even become the sport of blind chance and the prey of ruthless wickedness; the form into which the question ultimately resolves itself in the later tragedy of "King Lear," in which we have at once the most gigantic and grotesque conception of the relations between the natural and the spiritual worlds? With all his aptitudes for goodness, with all his capacities of nobleness and tenderness, and in spite of all his efforts to preserve a conscience of rectitude in the midst of sorcerous temptations, may he not be juggled with by fiends, nursed into evil purposes and drawn into criminal acts by supernatural spells, and led at last to destruction by malignant spirits? This is the question propounded in "Macbeth"; and it is one which points with soul-appalling efficacy to the scientific truth, recog-

nised and admitted by all ancient mythologies, and gloriously embodied in the modern art of Goethe and George Eliot, that there is a positive sympathy and reciprocity actually subsisting between the evil of the human heart and certain "powers auxiliary to vice" that exist mysteriously in the world around us. And finally, may not man be overmastered by some ancestral vice that lies latent in his nature until Circumstance—the *vis matrix* of Shakespearian tragedy, as some one has aptly called her—steps in to develop the unsuspected germs of evil; and may not an undistinguishing Fate sweep away at once the good with the wicked—Desdemona with Iago, and the brave Moorish commander with the lascivious flesh-fly of Venice, Roderigo? These are the questions which arise in "Othello." The hero comes into life sadly weighted. The bad traits and terrific predispositions of his wild, proud, fiery oriental nature, that quickly yields to every wave of passion that sweeps across his sensitive soul, have descended by inheritance. All the distinctive peculiarities of his semi-barbaric race—the tropical fancy, the credulity and superstition, the violent and obstinate temperament, the deep incalculable savage instincts which civilisation or the severities of self-discipline may temporarily check or cool but never efface or change—are latent in his soul, and only await circumstances to develop them into extremes of rapture and of pain. There are "fierce traditions" in his hot Mauritanian blood, such as inflict upon him unhappiness through life; germs of ancestral follies or weaknesses coursing in his veins, that eventually "blossom into blood-red sins." These things, the heritage of past generations, are stimulated into deadliest activity after a long period of latency, by the persistent attacks of Apollyon Circumstance; and, in a sense, as surely and completely provoke and provide for the last catastrophe of suffering and death as the malignant craft and cunning of Iago, by whom he is so utterly betrayed. Othello's life is thrown under the dominion of necessity by a bad direct heredity. His will is in conflict with fate; but the poet is careful to show us that the fatality which ultimately sweeps him away is the self-overmastering fatality of character. He is subdued and overthrown by Circumstance, which in romantic drama supplants the Fate of Greek tragedy as the motive power

of dramatic action; but he is also betrayed by those fierce and false passions which burn in his own bosom, and control and confound and consume all life. Othello is not merely the victim of Destiny, or the puppet of Circumstance,—which assuredly acts in Shakespearian drama like some satiric Demiurgus who finds amusement in making everything go wrong,—but the fool of his own nature.[1] The individual spirit of man is the one true spring of good and of evil.

II.

Now in each of the forecited tragedies the primary question in which the poet's passion for mystery takes relief varies in form, but the import of the question is practically the same in all. The subject of each drama is the struggle of good and evil in the world, or the ruin and restoration of the human soul; and in "Othello" quite as much as in "King Lear," in "Hamlet" quite as much as in "Macbeth," Shakespeare in his treatment of this subject betrays a lurking fondness for certain peculiar problems which rise into prominence in the central currents of sixteenth-century thought. Like Marlowe before him, or like Goethe after him, he may be said to have a sort of half-faith in the ghostly and supernatural machineries of the Gothic mythology: and in the principal plays of the third period of his art-life he certainly broods over the doctrine of the interfusion of the demoniacal with the human and divine; of the awful correspondence between the world without us and the world within, or the mysterious action and reaction between the human mind, with its base instincts and criminal aptitudes, and external nature with its accumulated forces of evil and its spiritual "powers auxiliary to vice" and independent of the will of individual man; and of the potential intermingling of the non-human or quondam-human or infra-human with the known life of the present. In point of fact, Shakespeare's feelings for the mysterious and sublime, and his half-faith in the wizardly and necromantic traditions of his age—

[1] On the points noticed in this paragraph see Spalding's 'Elizabethan Demonology,' 1880, 142 *et passim*.

things which he assuredly cherished as postulates for the imagination if his reason rejected them as permanent tenets of his creed —are the natural causes of such intensified poetic conceptions as the Weird Sisters, or Iago and Lady Macbeth, or Regan and Goneril. These *dramatis personæ* represent the three great categories into which the poet's belief regarding the possible intermingling of the demoniacal with the human and divine divides itself. In other words, they are the most striking examples to be met with in these tragedies of the non-human, the quondam-human, and the infra-human.

III.

And in farther elucidation of this point, let me here observe that the nameless and weather-beaten witches who hover "through the fog and filthy air" that invests the barren and blasted heath in "Macbeth" are not the village pariahs of vulgar tradition but potent and mysterious servants of the devil; not the broomstick beldams of popular belief, but a weird triad of "elemental avengers without sex or kin," as Coleridge says, in whom we discover all the salient features of those fabulous satanic and human metamorphoses, together with the gift of vaticination, of which we have so many examples in the venerable mythologies of the north. They are grotesque but sublime and terrible beings of cold, passionless, inexhaustible malignity, and endowed with "more than mortal knowledge," who serve the same purpose as that for which the petrific Eumenides, children of Erebus and Night, were introduced into the Æschylean tragedy, and whose dark machineries, mixed up "with the power of armies, with the agencies of kings, and the fortunes of martial kingdoms," produce effects no less appalling.[1] Here Shakespeare divines the true spirit of antiquity, conjures with the spells of the Middle Ages,

[1] See De Quincey, Works, xv. 82; also the monograph by Professor Masson on 'De Quincey' in English Men of Letters Series, from which I have borrowed one or two expressions in my answer to the questions propounded in the preceding paragraph.

and illuminates and harmonises the struggles and problems of human life at a time when the English nation was only just emerging from the dim twilight of medievalism into the full day of free inquiry as regards political and religious matters.

IV.

Then, as representative of the second of the forecited categories, we have Iago and Lady Macbeth, whose lives are not "disorganised and denaturalised by irruptions of the miraculous," but by conscious and persistent disloyalty to conscience and under the simple law of the self-propagating power of sin. They are arbiters of their own future, not victims of a blind inexorable Fate. Like Milton's Satan they embrace evil as their good, and yet retain a free-will and some elements of the original brightness of human nature. They voluntarily degrade their powers and faculties, prefer wrong to right, keep down by stress of will the insurgent moral forces of their being, and make an irreversible surrender of the good for the hostile principle. In other words, they assiduously cultivate dissimilarity of feeling with God, and the personal dissonance thus arising from prolonged wrong-doing becomes chronic, and at last, under the momentum of evil habit and the irreversible natural law of moral gravitation, falls into a final permanence of bad character. Both sin against light boldly and commit their villanies with full consciousness. The one indeed fondles and caresses his crimes as food of intellectual pride; the other cherishes the hell-venom that lurks in the innermost folds of her aspiring heart, as the unfailing means of attaining that "sovereign sway and masterdom" for which her lawless and ambitious nature thirsts. They are realised ideals: vital types of the quondam-human, of which we have an earlier (1594) example in the great crime-hero of the Histories, the "foul stigmatic" Richard III., with his bold and exulting avowal of reckless wickedness and his downright enunciation of his projected course of sin—

"I am determined to prove a villain,
And hate the idle pleasures of these days."

In them, as in him, all the sap and virtue of humanity is dried up. In outwrestling and down-trampling the powers of conscience they have knowingly and deliberately violated and transformed their whole nature. This fact transpires audibly, and with not a little of special emphasis, in the terrible self-delineative soliloquies of each. The passionless diabolism and dare-devil intellectuality of the sly, subtle, unfearing, and remorseless Iago leak out in the midst of his prudential prospective reasonings in those fearful words of self-pleasing virulence—

"Divinity of hell!
When devils will the blackest sins put on,
They do suggest at first with heavenly shows,
As I do now: for whiles this honest fool
Plies Desdemona to repair his fortunes
And she for him pleads strongly to the Moor,
I'll pour this pestilence into his ear,
That she repeals him for her body's lust;
And by how much she strives to do him good,
She shall undo her credit with the Moor.
So will I turn her virtue into pitch,
And out of her own goodness make the net
That shall enmesh them all."

And, on the other hand, Lady Macbeth voluntarily unsexes herself, consciously creates a complete dislocation and detachment from the life of nature, and unconcernedly falls into permanent dissimilarity of feeling with God, when she utters her terrible invocation to the sightless spirits which produce moral callousness in the soul, and makes her impious requisitions to the "murdering ministers" that "wait on nature's mischief," when she learns of Duncan's "fatal entrance" under her battlements—

"Come, you spirits
That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here,
And fill me from the crown to the toe top-full
Of direst cruelty! make thick my blood;
Stop up the access and passage to remorse,

> That no compunctious visitings of nature
> Shake my fell purpose, nor keep peace between
> The effect and it! Come to my woman's breasts,
> And take my milk for gall, you murdering ministers,
> Wherever in your sightless substances
> You wait on nature's mischief! Come, thick night,
> And pall thee in the dunnest smoke of hell,
> That my keen knife see not the wound it makes,
> Nor heaven peep through the blanket of the dark,
> To cry 'Hold, hold!'"

Here Shakespeare studies the strangest subjective experiences of the human heart in the moral region, and reveals to us the fearful extent of that disturbance which of necessity arises in a nature which voluntarily loves what God hates, and hates what God loves. In "Othello" and "Macbeth" he reaches down to a dark despairing depth of inexplicable wickedness and hopeless reprobation—a depth deeper than that of Æschylean or Sophoclean tragedy; and by means of such fiendish and shameless professions of wickedness, illustrates and enforces the momentous ethical truth that a brutal transfiguration of the entire character may follow upon the audacious abuse of free-will which commands the understanding, stifles the pleadings of conscience, and produces a constant obliquity of the moral sense. Or, in less debatable language, by once yielding to unhallowed desire and by making a bad choice, the demoniacal elements of man's fallen nature may gradually grow and harden into fixed habits of life, and eventually gain an absolute ascendancy over the human and divine. By an act of free-will Iago and Lady Macbeth create an unbridgeable chasm between themselves and humanity. Defiant and desperate, they revolt against the eternal laws of their own nature and the world. They risk the future for the sake of present power, fling themselves with unholy ardour into the devil's arms, and fall into permanence of dissimilarity of feeling with God. The poet presents these characters as pregnant illustrations of the incontrovertible scientific fact that the results of evil choice in character are *effects*, but effects which in due time become *causes*. Are not the betrayal of Othello and the murder of Duncan followed by the slaughter of Emilia, whose testimony condemns, and of Banquo, whose pre-

sence threatens; by the stony impenitence and "incapacity for noble pain" of the Ancient, and the incurable despair and madness of the fiend-like Scottish Queen?

V.

I have but a few words to add concerning the characters of the third and last class. Once, and once only,—for I look upon "Titus Andronicus," a play conspicuously unlike any other of his productions either as regards style or subject, as properly belonging to the pre-Shakespearian group of bloody tragedies of which Kyd's "Spanish Tragedy" is perhaps the most typical example,—our poet overpasses the limits of the Hamlet-ideal of his art, and to the usual elements of sombre dramatic terror adds elements that are weirdly horrible and bloodily sensual. This is in the sanguinary drama of "King Lear." Regan and Goneril, characters that only the might and masterdom of Shakespeare's daringly brilliant genius could have evoked and managed, are the solitary examples of the infra-human to be met with in his tragedies. From these redoubtable agents of hell not one ray of human sympathy or human kindness falls. In their bosoms there is no touch of nature, in their actions no trace of shame, in their language no grace of genuine feeling, in their end no faintest sign of repentance or desire of atonement, no capacity even for learning that lesson "to be wise and seek for grace" which Caliban, the monstrous moon-calf of "The Tempest," who has no idea of goodness, no notion of wisdom, no consciousness of personal error and wrong-doing, can still lay to heart. Framed of grossness and malignity, and for ever active in plotting evil, they have no conscience from which remorse can be elicited, no heart from which pity can be drawn.

The strange and terrible confusion of natures which we discover in them excludes them from the sphere of moral life. They are part women, part demons, part beasts, like the fabled Sphinx of Boeotia; and what strikes one most is not the keen resentment or unbridled malice or deadly malignity of their boundless and "unbordered" nature, but the entire absence from it of all human

attributes and of all spiritual cravings, sensibilities, and checks. They are not only empty of the graces and virtues but unmarked by the common human frailties of womanhood.[1] They are not even moved by the ordinary motives which lead to human wickedness, but by a "strong original impulse of malignity," under the stress of which they commit cruel and barbarous crimes spontaneously, just as a tree puts forth leaves by a natural tendency, or produces new fruit by a regular progressive development. In the black delirium of defiant and dauntless devilhood they not only blight and blast the lives of those with whom they are associated, but diminish and degrade what for convenience of discourse may be called the supremacy and majesty of evil to the smallest degradation of infamy; and, like spirits broke loose from the pit of woe, dwell with jubilant ferocity upon the miseries and horrors which they so cunningly and remorselessly bring about. In short, they are as loathsome as they are vicious, as mean as they are wicked, as apt to excite disgust as to inspire terror or awe.

Of Iago and Edmund and Richard it might with perfect propriety be said that they represent the grandeur of revolt against the light. They are types of nature ruined and diabolised. And in their moods of passionate insurgence against the stern laws of moral life they show something of the gigantic force and solemn largeness of resource, the stoical courage and scornful imagination, the godlike disdain of little things that you find in the shaggy trifaced Lucifer of Dante. You can discern in these distempered souls some slight traces too of the undoubted if distorted nobility of Milton's Satan when, ravished with his own conceit, hardened in strength and distended with intellectual pride, he braves the Almighty and smiles defiantly in Heaven's face;—a being always massive and "majestic, though in ruin." But it is far otherwise with the formidable Gorgonean evil-doers of "King Lear," whose terrible aspect, like that of Euryale and Medusa, the sister-deities of Hesiod, can almost turn the beholder into stone; albeit Mr Swinburne, when contrasting her with Regan, speaks of Goneril's "fire-flaught of hellish glory" and her one splendid hour of fierce imperious devilry. The sordidness and brutal power, the savage

[1] See Coleridge *ut supra*, 535.

trickishness and pitiless callousness of this "brace of harlots" are *always* sharply evident; and both alike, by mere insolence of disgrace, are so far removed beyond the outer pale of all rational life, that it is impossible for any one to imagine that they were ever anything else but what they actually are. There is no mystery about them, no sense of anything hidden or unseen, no faintest trace in the whole structure of their being of a higher state of nature from which they have fallen through yielding to intellectual pride or sensual indulgence or lust of self. Hideous, obdurate, semi-bestial, they delight in what is gross, mean, cruel, and contemptible; and engage not in great enterprises of subtle and deep-reaching villany like Iago and Richard, whose intellectuality is such as almost to remind one of the ruined splendour of some demigod, but in perpetual and undissembled mischief and schemes of witless wickedness like the pitchforking devils of the Malebolge.

VI.

On a previous page it has been pointed out that "King Lear" is the one serious performance of our poet the interest and situations of which depend on the assumption of a gross improbability. And of these foul, devil-possessed, irredeemable beings, who go their headlong course along the Gadarean way to the pit of destruction, it may with even greater truth be said that if they do not actually exceed the possibility of nature,—and it is in that light that I regard them, for I agree with Mr Hudson in thinking that their action is the most improbable thing in the whole drama, and that "before the heart could become so thoroughly petrified the brain must cease to operate,"—they certainly border on its utmost line. We shall never know what moved Shakespeare to give us such lurid and Dantesque pictures of the "pure unnatural"; such dramatic exhibitions of depravity so unsoftened and extreme. Probably he favoured the belief that even Regan and Goneril had their awful counterparts in the real world. It seems certain at least that he accepted the prevailing doctrine of the possible interfusion of the infra-human with the known life

of the present as a postulate for the imagination, if not for the reason; just as Spenser in "The Faerie Queene" (Book II. Canto viii.), Marlowe in "Doctor Faustus," or Massinger and Dekker in "The Virgin Martyr," accepted for poetic purposes another belief, equally vital and active in the age of Elizabeth, which assigned to every man at his birth two opposing spirits—a bad angel to tempt and a good angel to guard from temptation—who followed him through the whole course of his life.

That Shakespeare, who entertained the most just conception of the female character, who possessed the most perfect knowledge of its simplicity and tenderness, and who at the same period was breathing immortal life into such radiant shapes as Ophelia, Desdemona, Cordelia, and Brutus' Portia, in whom are to be found all the holiest elements of true womanhood, ever derived the least satisfaction from portraying such ghoul-like hags as Regan and Goneril is not to be believed; that he ever seriously affirmed even to himself the *vraisemblance* of their life and action is also extremely improbable. Personifications of the malignant forces of nature they undoubtedly are, and thus regarded they never fail to furnish food for endless thought and reflection; but women in any true sense of the word they assuredly are not; and in order to account for the genesis and development of creatures so far and so completely removed and cut off from the life of Humanity—beings who certainly bear the form but entirely lack the nature of women—it would almost be necessary to believe in the possibility of some such mysterious union betwixt Earth and Tartarus as that which gave birth "in the wide womb of uncreated night" to the fire-breathing Typhœus, that terror-inspiring monster of the primitive world, half-serpent and half-human, of which we read in the "Theogony" of Hesiod and the "Iliad" of Homer.

You see then that, whilst primarily the poet of real and concrete things, Shakespeare's imagination is permeated with the spiritual afflatus of divine mystery. And these characters, with all of whom, it need not be said, his moral sense stands in ardent antagonism, give us the best idea of his receptivity and openness of mind, of his robust imagination in its most abstract reaches towards the invisible, of his fixed and firm belief in the interference in human

affairs of other and more occult agencies than are dreamt of in the professed philosophy of such men as Bacon and Raleigh and Hooker. They not only illustrate the fecundity of his genius, but reflect something of his own moods of pensive curiosity or wild-eyed breathless inspiration, when, brought into contact with the sternest realities of existence and standing in a forward-gazing attitude, he is bent, Hamlet-like, on discovering the all-explaining bond of connection between the real world of finite nature and the real and infinite supernatural world.

CHAPTER IV.

AGNOSTICISM.

I.

THE period which contains the great tragedies is in a peculiar sense the period during which Shakespeare, in Homer's phrase, is "feeding on his heart." It is a period of solemn introspection, of independent investigation of the bases of hereditary faith, of stern and prolonged inquisition into the mystery of evil, of wistful curiosity respecting the significance of the hard riddles in human destiny. It is in these "Othellos" and "Macbeths" and "Lears" which deal with the depravity of the world, the nullity of appearances, the illusions of sense, the littleness and instability of man's nature, and the dark riddles and incomprehensible anomalies and strange perplexities which try his faith and grieve his heart, that we come into contact with Shakespeare's spiritual imagination at a time when it has attained its most powerful and intense vitality.

But whilst we may thus learn from these dramas something authentic concerning Shakespeare's own opinions and beliefs, we cannot educe from them a great original creed or ethical code that will satisfy the intellect on all points. For his poetry is in no true sense "a quantum of intelligible propositions," a thing pivoted on personal prejudice or private passion or even on express and direct precept. In all his work it is true there is not only the mark of poetic greatness, but of wide philosophic grasp

and accurate perception. But there is also noticeable a studied incompleteness and a prudent addiction to reticence of feeling in respect of many of the deepest problems and saddest mysteries of human life. He seems indeed systematically to exclude from consideration many of those ethical and theological questions which had such a strong fascination for the minds of such men as Herbert and Hooker and Bacon, even when the most favourable opportunities occur for their discussion. And this is obviously attributable not to any want of interest or *intelligence* on his part, but to a want of *intelligibility* in the questions themselves, of which in many of his dramas, and especially in "Hamlet" and "Othello" and "King Lear," he seems to be painfully conscious. Our poet's philosophy is pre-eminently the philosophy of common sense; and even when he inclines to mysticism his mysticism is essentially of the exoteric school. It is the mysticism not of a Dante, with his sublime, severe, and ardent force of vision, but of a Browning, with his richness and compass and unflagging strength. Knowing that the highest is always the unintelligible, and that it refuses to be bounded by the understanding, he aims at giving poetic expression to the common needs and thoughts and emotions of humanity in active and passionate exercise, and keeps his mind unenclosed by the circumscriptions of creeds, his heart unfettered by the narrowing spirit of formula.

From anything like metaphysical scepticism, however, Shakespeare is entirely free; as free, indeed, even in his Hamlet-mood, as Immanuel Kant himself, whose ethics have been described as essentially identical with the ethics of our dramatist.[1] The histrionic exhibitions of the one and the philosophic demonstrations of the other reveal at least the same purposes, and reach, by different methods, the same results. Both affirm the incapacity of man to deal with the irrelative and infinite, or to comprehend God, the World, or Man, absolutely. Both acknowledge the finitude of human reason and the unalterable relativity of human knowledge. Both make good man's personality, his freedom of will, his subjection to moral law. As will be discovered later on, when I enter upon the detailed study of the tragedy of "Othello,"

[1] By F. Kreyssig in 'Shakespeare-Fragen,' 128.

rectitude of will is with Shakespeare, as with Kant, the only absolute good to be found in the world. Practical reason, in and through which the revelation of moral law is effected, is regarded by both as "the governor of will to constitute it good"—a truth aptly illustrated and eloquently enforced by Iago in the third scene of the first act of our play. And the will, which in the Ancient's phrase contains all "the power and corrigible authority" of man's nature, is essentially free in order to goodness. In these three propositions, then, we have not only a statement of the fundamental positions of Kant's ethical system, but a trustworthy description of the primary ethic principles which radiate through the dramas of Shakespeare, who embodies poetically but without any pride or ostentation of virtue or moral demonstrativeness, the great truth formally enunciated by the philosopher of Königsberg two centuries later, that the moral law is a categorical imperative which elevates our worth as intelligences, but makes no exceptions and leaves no option to the will.[1]

II.

Our poet may affirm the incompleteness of human knowledge. But he never says anything "to make us impatient of acquiescence in *imperfect* knowledge, which is a necessary condition of our existence here," as Bishop Wordsworth so wisely observed in his Tercentenary Sermon preached at Stratford in 1864. He may reject the doctrine of theological optimism. But he never assumes an attitude of deliberate hostility and revolt against the established facts and beliefs of his age, like the over-daring Shelley, who, with a mind precociously developed into a grave fulness of knowledge, is found waging war unceasingly against all the reigning conventions of his time. He may speak bitterly of the triumphs of evil and emphasise the fact of human misery. But the author of "Othello" does not draw painful or hopeless conclusions from the pessimism of his dramatic personages, or really add the weight of his own to the burden of his brother, like the heart-stricken

[1] See Kant, Metaphysic of Ethics (Semple's trans., edition 1869), xi.

Italian poet Leopardi. He never succumbs to despair, although he sometimes paints a painful and gloomy picture of human life. The passionate revolt of a Timon, it is to be remembered, is followed by the placid and reconciling activities of a Prospero. And just so the poet passes from moods of ideal misanthropy to moods of real and victorious strength, and survives into peace and light and pure joy of life. Indeed, if allowance is made for differences of manner and method, of power and performance, between the Classical and Romantic makers, the burden to the famous chorus in the Orestean trilogy of Æschylus, in which gloom and glory are so strangely intermingled,—

"Sing a strain of lamentation, yet may good prevail at last,"—

may be said to shadow forth the master-thought and governing motive of all our poet's great tragedies. Shakespeare may sometimes dwell with piercing irony on the sorrow and suffering and sin of a world that is said to be ruled by a wise, benevolent, righteous Power. But he does not trouble himself with the resulting problem of the final cause of human existence. That is a mystery which he at once pronounces insoluble. And to answer the questions which it necessarily involves and suggests either in the sceptical or the optimistic sense would, according to the philosophy of our poet, be equally presumptuous.

III.

Agnosticism is certainly no adequate definition of Shakespeare's religious position. And yet, having regard to the heart of doctrine that is discoverable in such dramas as "Hamlet" and "Othello," or "Macbeth" and "King Lear," it seems more than probable that, in respect of secondary points at least, he would not have refused the name of an agnostic. Having once satisfied himself as to the inherent and constructive limits of human cognition, he manifests, as a rule, quite as much caution as courage in his quest of truth, and seldom indulges acute perceptions at the expense of judgment. He does not attribute to the intellect more power

of attaining truth than it actually possesses. Neither does he arbitrarily reduce its powers or affirm a positive inability to know *anything* concerning those questions which are of primal moment to mankind. He demonstrates, in "Hamlet" and "King Lear" for instance, the finitude of reason in man. But not its essential fallibility; in proof of which I need only point to "Othello" and "Macbeth." No doubt the spirit of his art—and this is due partly to the instincts of his individual genius, partly to Renaissance influences—is in many respects what one would now call agnostic. But, strictly speaking, and notwithstanding that in his great tragedies he "ends with a look back, never on towards anything beyond"—the statement is an extreme one, but it may pass for the present—he is an agnostic only in so far as he asserts the impossibility of solving the insoluble and knowing the unknowable. His doubt is not to be confounded with negative dogmatism. With regard to all speculative problems it is simply a wise suspension of assent. And therefore his agnosticism is not the one-sided and iconoclastic agnosticism of Hume or Leopardi, but the broad, reverent, constructive agnosticism of Kant, who seeks to relieve human nature and science from the pressure of philosophical scepticism, or of George Eliot, whose ideal of a virtuous life, as revealed in her novels, which are essentially Shakespearian in grain, implies suspension of judgment with respect to transcendental questions.

Shakespeare has faith in the spiritual intuitions and passions of the human heart. He knows something of the nature and value of those authentic visions—"solutions of the soul's own questions"—which come, in hours of guarded retirement,—

> "When the light of sense
> Goes out, but with a flash that has revealed
> The invisible world,"—

to such poets as Dante and Milton, or Shelley and Wordsworth. Like them he feels before he reasons. But he also knows something of the limits and capacities and procedure of the human mind, and of the folly of offering a mere individual fancy as a new insight to mankind. Life, according to him, is essentially

grounded in mysteries, regarding which either affirmation or negation is, in many cases, beyond human understanding. Hence, whilst attempting to give his perceptions of truth a logical basis, he plainly shows in numberless instances that he is by no means quite satisfied of the veracity of his own faculties. Some of the very profoundest of his own conclusions are consciously built upon assumptions which can neither be proved nor disproved. In matters of faith he neither exhibits the over-confidence of the early or Middle-Age Gnostic, nor the deficient trust of the modern Agnostic. He has nothing of the unreflecting credulity and passion for theorising of the one: he has nothing of the hopeless and bottomless doubt and denial of the other. He belongs emphatically to the imaginative as distinguished from the speculative order of minds, and occupies a position between these two forms of faith—in a region of rational certainty, relative, conditional, and experimental; and it seems to be a mental necessity to our poet, whose sternly truthful realism is one of the chief causes of his artistic supremacy, that religious and philosophical principles should clothe themselves in concrete flesh and blood before he can fully believe in them. In Religion and Ethics alike his instincts are positive rather than speculative.

IV.

The fact that Shakespeare, whilst undeniably Protestant though anti-Puritan, should have taken no distinct side in the great debate as to revelation, inspiration, and the other theological issues that agitated and divided society in the controversial age of Elizabeth, is one which has given rise to much comment. And the folly and futility of such discussions is clearly proved on the one hand by the critical inquiry of Birch, who regards our poet's reticence and reserve about holy things as proofs of his atheism or unbelief, and on the other, by the fanatical arguments of M. Rio, who asserts that his apparent predilection for the clergy of the obsolescent faith, his regard for the sacred contemplativeness of cloister-life, and his intimate acquaintance with

the Roman ritual are, *inter alia*, convincing proofs of his Catholic sympathies and beliefs. Any one who reads the learned and invaluable book by the present Bishop of St Andrews on 'Shakespeare's Knowledge and Use of the Bible' will have no difficulty in satisfying himself of the absurdity of all such conclusions; and will be led to agree with the opinion pronounced by Dr Wordsworth, who not only establishes the fact that the poet is a Protestant who draws his inspiration from the pages of Holy Scripture, but that in all essential points he submits his reason to the truth which it reveals, and his conscience "to the moral lessons which it prescribes."

Nevertheless the fact is as I have stated it to be at the commencement of the last paragraph. Shakespeare's relation to the spirit of his epoch is very different from that of his contemporary Ben Jonson, or, to take examples from later times, from that of Goethe, or Wordsworth, or Hugo; all of whom adopt in their poetry, in greater or less degree, the special ideas and peculiar tendencies and predominant passions of their age and nation. He is Protestant in his religious principles just as he is monarchical in his political sentiments. He even gives full vent to the national indignation at the arrogance, intrigue, and aggression of the Papacy. And in this way, as Ulrici has observed, he allows the *general* spirit of sixteenth-century life to operate upon him. Yet, strictly speaking, "he works upon, and is moved by, nothing but what is common to all mankind;"[1] and therefore his non-participation in most of the leading controversies of the time is not to be attributed to inattention or neglect of the profound and solemn questions which give rise to them,—for he has neither the defiant intellectual pride of a Byron nor the contemplative indifference of a Coleridge,—but to the tender reserve and humble modesty of his nature, to the severe conscientiousness of his human sympathies, to the generous richness and breadth of his judgment, to the impartial cosmopolitan character of his genius. These are at once the most conspicuous and the most valuable qualities of his art.

In matters pertaining to Religion Shakespeare is in no sense a

[1] See Ulrici, 'Shakespeare's Dramatic Art,' 1846, 126.

bigot. Indeed I do not remember at this moment a single character in his dramas who can be said to be even slightly tinged with religious bigotry. And neither is he a partisan teacher of Ethics; but a student of the world, of its uses and meaning and worth, whose main object it is to effect a union between reality and imagination such as that which his great contemporary Bacon strove to effect between reason and experience. Pious in the original and broader meaning of the word, and loyal to all the promptings and aspirations of the intellectual nature, he claims kindred with those high-hearted hunters of truth and bards of philosophy who have supplied the links between Reason and Faith—Plato and Aristotle, Bacon and Descartes, Berkeley and Kant. The principle by which these men were animated in the pursuit of truth, the principle which rooted itself so immutably in the very texture and constitution of their minds,—"Prove all things: hold fast that which is good,"—is precisely the principle which Shakespeare as the poet of real and concrete things rigorously applies in his treatment of all matters of speculative faith. This principle, let it be remembered, was as truly the master-thought or foundation of the Reformation, the specifically religious forces and modes of thought of which great movement very largely directed and determined the genius of our poet, as it is the fundamental axiom of modern science as represented by Darwin and Huxley and Tyndall; and therefore you find it operative in every line of that philosophy which is developed in the dramatic writings of Shakespeare as certainly as you discover it working in the elaboration and application of the physical experimental and inductive sciences of to-day.

V.

Sixteenth-century agnosticism, then, as represented by Shakespeare, is predominantly religious in aim. And yet the whole tendency of his teaching is in justification of philosophic doubt and suspense of judgment. The view of things which he exhibits in his dramas is purely, distinctly, completely Christian; and the faith

which he professes is in all essential matters strictly in accordance with that which the Gospel demands. And yet his faith is indubitably one which rests in actual apprehension and experience of the truth, and is in no sense a faith which passively accepts what it is told to be truth. It rejects the tyranny of tradition and the text, and brings the authority of the Church itself to the bar of Reason. His agnosticism simply amounts in its positive aspect to an extension of the Baconian system, that man must have a foundation for all that he holds as known. Bacon applies the principle chiefly to physical science. Our poet brings it into the domain of mental and ethical science. In matters of the intellect, Shakespeare would say, do not profess the knowledge that thou hast not, but sound every question to the bottom, throw aside all prejudices and all interests, and follow your reason as far as it will take you, without regard to any other consideration; and do not yield too readily to the spontaneous sentiment, or pretend that conclusions are certain which are not demonstrated or demonstrable, or allow your convictions to outstrip your evidence. In other words, he opposes everything like theological dogmatism; and, whilst touching upon the general and ordinary revelations of God in nature and in history, in the control of human life and in the movements of the human heart, he defines a limit to human attainment in the sphere of religious speculation.

In all ages, questions of Death and Immortality, Origin of Evil, Freedom and Necessity, continually arise under new forms; and, from time to time, men endeavour to shape for themselves some complete theorem of the universe that will yield contentment to the heart overburdened with mystery. "And ever unsuccessfully: for what Theorem of the Infinite can the Finite render complete? . . . Metaphysical Speculation, as it begins in No or Nothingness, so it must needs end in Nothingness; circulates and must circulate in endless vortices; creating, swallqwing,—itself."[1] The words quoted are by Carlyle; but they breathe the true spirit of Shakespeare, who sums up the whole philosophy of life in a sublime three-lined "theorem," or "pathetic abstraction," as De Quincey somewhere calls it, which not only reveals his own ag-

[1] Carlyle, "Characteristics," Works, iv. 19, 20.

nostic bias, but exposes, and one may be pardoned for believing, *designedly* exposes, the folly and futility of all such attempts to clasp within a frame of theory things which from their very nature can find no adequate description and no just measurement in words—

> "We are such stuff
> As dreams are made of; and our little life
> Is rounded by a sleep."

This is the kernel of all that is most agnostic in Shakespeare's teaching. And this description of his religious attitude explains and justifies, I venture to think, the reserve and reticence observed by him in his delineations of human character and human destiny.

Our poet is not scared by the Origin of Evil or unmindful of the difficult problems in ethics to which that question gives rise. He fearlessly grapples with it in "Macbeth" and "Othello." But he does not attempt to give any formal account of it. In these dramas he shows his familiarity with all that is black and terrible: pushes his way into the darkest corners and the deadliest hollows of the human heart; peers into the history of secret, spontaneous, and motiveless crime. But Satan does not reveal himself here as in Milton's epic. In this regard Shakespeare's positivity is less elevated, if more coherent, than that of the Puritan seer. His tendency to dramatise ideal conceptions is kept in restraint by his sternly truthful realism and his passion for concrete fact. His characters are not conceived and sustained on so exorbitant a scale as the colossal hero of "Paradise Lost."

On the other hand, no *Deus ex machina* of arbitrary power descends from the clouds to punish vice and reward virtue, or close the debate between good and evil by deciding in favour of one of the contending parties and against the other. The advice which Horace gives to dramatic writers, *Nec deus intersit, nisi dignus vindice nodus*, is followed by the Elizabethan playwright, who never introduces even the very idea of divine interference except on occasions of the highest importance. In "Othello" no higher Power intervenes expressly to vindicate the virtue of Desdemona or punish the unspeakable wickedness of

that Spartan dog Iago. And in this we see a capital distinction between the Classical and the Romantic Drama. Shakespearian art differs from the Sophoclean in this chiefly, that there is comparatively little of divine Nemesis, and that it relegates to the after-world all questions of rewards and punishments. Here the rule is the rule of life as recorded in the actual occurrences of sacred and profane history: the towers of Siloam seldom fall upon the right people.

And with all his imaginative insight into the dark mysteries of nature, and in spite of that ever-craving thirst for power and knowledge which tempts him at times to thread "the dim-discovered tracts of mind," our poet, unlike some of his senior contemporaries, does not yield utterly to the "allurements of impossible desire." He does not attempt to visualise the invisible, like Spenser in his moments of trance-like meditation; or to grasp things that are unattainable by mental force or mastering will, like Marlowe in his moods of boundless aspiration and lawless spiritual lust; or to translate into a system of dogmas the facts and transactions of Christianity, like Milton; or,—to take a more apposite example still,—like the over-daring authors of the coarse and crude Miracle and Mystery Plays of Widkirk and Chester and Coventry, in which we have a literal or mechanical reflection of the persons and doctrines and things of the Christian faith. From Hamlet's remonstrance with the players at the Court of Elsinore it may be safely inferred that Shakespeare had no sympathy with such bald and familiar treatment of sacred themes. Here we have no such visions of the spiritual post-sepulchral life, and no such attempts to unveil those realities that lie behind phenomena from the knowledge of which our intelligence is mercifully debarred; although in one instance,—in the death-scene of the patient and saintly Katharine of "King Henry VIII.,"—Shakespeare departs from his invariable practice, and gives us a heavenly vision which foreshadows the destiny of the hapless Queen, who receives the homage of a "blessed troop" of glorified spirits, the crown of immortality, and the promise of "eternal happiness." The sufferings of the present time are thus made radiant with the coming of the glory which shall be revealed in her.

VI.

With this reserve and sense of limitation, however, there mixes an element more positive, a faith robuster and more fortifying. The poet, who in a play of the Second Period[1] expressly divides "the world" into that which is "familiar to us" and that which is "unknown," does not endeavour, as I have just indicated, to solve the mystery of life. But he very clearly perceives where the mystery commences. He does not set himself to interpret or set forth by means of dialectical formulæ, like Calderon or our own Milton, the supreme spiritual problems of human existence. But he reflects to our view all the great enigmas and riddles of the world and life; and discovers, as the case has been well put by Gervinus in his 'Commentaries,' the moving springs of action "and the necessity of the fate which they involve." Here in the world there is evil. This fact Shakespeare presses home upon our hearts with painful weight and tenacity. He shows us Iago and Iachimo, Macbeth and Queen Goneril. But goodness also exists. We have Desdemona and Imogen, Duncan and Kent. And there is also in the earth "a sacred passion of deliverance." This is made known to us by such characters as Cordelia and Horatio, or Edgar and Octavia: types of purity and patience, of fidelity and self-sacrifice; beings of sweet and solid qualities who shed a serene and steady light over the stormy sea of sin and sorrow that surrounds their lives. Shakespeare urges, with a force which we cannot resist, these plain and dreadful, or consoling and compensating, truths upon us. He knows something of the sumless treasure of a Desdemona's love and the pure redeeming ardour that lies latent in the nun-like soul of a Cordelia. But he also knows something of the pitiless malignity of an Iago with his hard and trenchant intellect, and of the remorseless death-dealing treachery of an Edmund. These things are not presented as ventures of faith or conjectures of fear; but as stern undeniable facts of the actual world, from which escape is impossible so long as things continue as they are, so long as the imagination of Shakespeare

[1] In "King Henry V.," Act iii. scene 7.

controls our own. And the poet does not pause to lighten the burden of the mystery by showing us that "there is a soul of goodness in things evil." He does not profess to be able to explain how Iago and Edmund can be, or why Desdemona lies smothered on the bridal bed, or why Cordelia lies strangled in the lap of Lear. He is concerned only with the positive concrete realities of the present life. In all of his tragedies, no doubt, there is vaguely suggested a final far-off reconciliation. It is certain that the chaos is only apparent, and that somewhere a Providence is presiding over the development of events. But Shakespeare, whilst peering into the darkness that lies around the known world of human destiny, seldom troubles us with the guesses and surmises of his own acquisitive soul. He deals only with phenomena that can be tried and tested by experience. He pursues the soul of man to the brink of the grave and no further; and makes no attempt to transfigure the actions and sufferings, the hopes and fears of Humanity with light from the spiritual world. Nor is there any need. For in the last scene of "Othello" we have no difficulty whatever in determining whither Iago is inevitably going, or where Desdemona has already gone.[1]

The inmost meaning of such a drama as "Othello" is to be apprehended not through the logical understanding but through the feelings. The poet only gives us in the magic mirror of his art vivid and infinitely suggestive reflections of the eternal enigmas of human life. In place of a doctrine or interpretation or revelation such as we get in the "starry *Autos*" of the wonder-working Calderon, who lightly solves the riddles of existence, we have word-pictures of surpassing subtlety and strength: Rembrandt-like sketches of stern yet tender beauty, with great human figures in the foreground, drawn with psychological truthfulness and tragic pathos; idealised, it is true, but idealised with such solidity and temperance and inward firmness that, with the solitary exceptions noted in the preceding chapter, they are all invested with a sort of historic verisimilitude and live in the "memory of the eye" for ever.

[1] Professor Dowden has condensed the truth of the matter discussed in the text in his 'Shakespeare: His Mind and Art,' 226; and to what is there written I beg to acknowledge my indebtedness.

CHAPTER V.

CRITICISM OF LIFE.

I.

I AM now led by a natural sequence to the consideration of other questions for which, bounded as is my space, I must yet find room. What is Shakespeare's primary purpose as poet? What is the salient attribute of his dramatic genius; the peculiar endowment which distinguishes him from his precursors and lifts him far above the greatest of his contemporaries? And what is the power which, apart from the "fertility and depth of his natural gifts," has most contributed to give him the leadership of the modern world? In what follows of this chapter I shall attempt an answer to these questions.

In almost all our great world-poets we can discern an object which they seek, if they do not fully gain. It is the earnest aim of Chaucer, for instance, to paint the manners of the fourteenth century from a central and truly human point of view. Dante certainly abides in the world of introspective thought, and for the most part employs his imagination in weaving a wonder-web of divine metaphysics; but he also views from a definite point of observation and sympathy the objective life of Florence and Pisa and Verona, and delights to picture in darkest arras-work the sad and violent life of fanatical Catholicism. Spenser as certainly lives in the world of self-originating emotion; the dream-world of Plato and Plautinus, peopled with visionary shapes brighter and

more beautiful than those of this gross earth, and placed midway between the actual and the possible, "on that extreme verge where objects vanish and pure idealism begins." And yet his view of human life is earnest, ample, and in the main correct. The sentiment of nature is deep, sincere, and ever-flowing. The real and dominant political and religious feelings of the Elizabethan age may even be educed from the most intensely ideal of his conceptions. And the supreme aim and end of his great epic is confessedly "to fashion a gentleman or noble person in virtuous and gentle discipline." Marlowe, again, may be said to leave or rise above the commoner facts and concerns of human life and to idealise passions on a gigantic scale. One discerning critic has with singular propriety called him "the sculptor-poet of Colossi." His knowledge is not the fruit of actual experience amongst men. It is rather the result of sheer imaginative insight into the mysteries of nature. His characters are of superhuman size; vast, rough-hewn, titanic. They are not human beings studied from contemporary life. They are simply and solely sculpturesque embodiments or "animated moulds" of the deepest and wildest human passions; or colossal personifications of "single qualities and simple forces"; in either case, intense and extravagant projections from his own subjectivity. Fervour of conceptive faculty and not realistic verisimilitude is therefore the quality by which his work is most distinguished. Instead of the sober common-sense and sternly truthful realism of Shakespeare, whose delineations are vivid with the spirit of his age, we have in Marlowe the richness and insolence and pride of an exuberant fancy and an untamable heart, and a kind of moon-raking grandiloquence admirably adapted perhaps for expressing the central passion by which the poet is inspired, and which is happily defined as "*L'Amour de l'Impossible*—the love or lust of unattainable things," but quite unfit for conveying an adequate impression of the actual needs and greeds of the human spirit in all ages of the world's history. The aim and ambition of this superb but ill-regulated genius is to startle, arouse, and allure by visions of illimitable knowledge and power and beauty, as in "Faustus" and "Tamburlaine" and the "Jew

of Malta"; not to instruct and enlarge and ennoble by exhibitions of goodness and sacrifice and victorious strength.[1] How different the aim of our sacred Milton! He regards himself in the great and livid heat of his prophetic moments not as an author but as the passive medium or mouthpiece of "that Eternal Spirit who," in his own words, "can enrich with all utterance and all knowledge." His one desire and endeavour is to vindicate the ways of God to man. And Wordsworth, kindred in spirit to Milton, also employs his imagination as an instrument for the discovery of truth. His interest in man is moral and not properly literary. In the highest mountings of his mind, in the most illuminated moments of rapture and of song, he breathes the spirit, and, as poet and polemic alike, perpetuates the ideals and traditions of the seventeenth century. A man of stringent pathos and emotional ardour, with a learned wide-sweeping eye and a passionate interest in the beauty and the grandeur of the world of sense, he takes the utmost delight in following the windings of human thought on those momentous questions which form, so to speak, the borderland between the human and the divine: shows us the poetry and divinity that are in grass and weeds, the sermons that are in stones, the thoughts too deep for tears enfolded in the meanest flower, the deep significance that lies in local and occasional events; and draws from such visible things of common life an intuition of higher things not seen. And, finally, Southey, in whose strong nature the ethical spirit predominates, traces the natural history of man's mind and character, and treats him as if he were a moral being and nothing else. He shares Heine's keen sense of the immemorial charms of Eastern romance, and endeavours to teach Christian morality through the medium of the gigantic myths of India and Arabia. If Wordsworth, as has been said, cuts himself off stealthily and mysteriously from the modern spirit, Southey in a sense fails to apply modern ideas to life, and makes little or no attempt to interpret the needs and aspirations and passions of his age.

[1] See Symonds, 'Shakespeare's Predecessors in the English Drama,' 1884, 608 *seqq.*

II.

Now, in Shakespeare, who may be justly said to represent the prime and accomplishment of English dramatic art, there are to be found all the most salient attributes of the poets named. He has Dante's creative faculty and burning vision, his poignant realistic manner, his wide and accurate knowledge of the grave and tragic side of man's nature. He has Spenser's delicate allegorical fancy, his keen insight into human motives and emotions, his careless abundance and overrunning luxuriance of bold and beautiful imagery, his musical felicity of diction and variety and sweep of measure. And if in the four great tragedies of the Third Period Shakespeare shows little or nothing of Marlowe's bombast and fustian and Gargantuan grandiloquence; little or nothing of the strut and swell and "tempestuous verbiage" of "Tamburlaine," or the raw repulsive Teniers-like realism of the "Jew of Malta," or the somewhat wire-drawn soul-dissections of "Doctor Faustus," —he has at least the glowing and shaping imagination, the sombre force, the spiritual audacity, the intensity of inspired conviction of his illustrious forerunner. He has also Milton's depth of intuition and profoundly inward passion, his majestic fulness of ethical reflection, his rich Hyblœan eloquence and lyric power. He has Wordsworth's warmth of susceptibility to the beautiful, his passionate and unwearied delight in simple things and homely truths and all the familiar shapes and appearances of rural scenery, his unfailing power of interpreting "the physiognomy and movement of the outward world," and of vividly reproducing what is pleasurable and open in the life of nature. And he has Southey's simplicity and strength, his calm continuous energy of mind, his scrupulous self-mastery of hand. But, above all, he has Chaucer's serene impartiality of mind, his luminous and coherent positivity, his independent and inexhaustible power of transforming himself into everything, and of making everything understood and seen by the human mind. He has his homely sincerity of human sympathy, his breadth and depth of humour, his unerring truth to life in its most thrilling moments, his faculty of naturalistic inter-

pretation—in a word, his satisfying sense of objective reality; that supreme artistic quality which not only reconciles him with himself but with humanity and the universe at large.

Such examples of intellectual resemblance, I need not say, might be multiplied indefinitely. The merest tyro in literature could easily cull passages from Shakespeare which would reveal even to the least discriminating many of the distinctive qualities of those of our poets whose fame has spread widest, and whose influence has struck deepest root in the heart of the people. This is a natural and inevitable result in the case of one who sums up in himself all the essential attributes of true poetic greatness: of one who stands alone amongst the singers, like Apollo amongst the gods of Greece, and has no second;—self-centred and solitary in his Olympian calm, *totus teres atque rotundus;* especially in the "Lear" and "Othello" period of his dramatic life when he seems to be wholly occupied in mastering the inequalities of his own passions. For, notwithstanding the multifarious excellences of such men as Marlowe, Jonson, Webster, Heywood, Fletcher, Ford, Massinger, and a score of contemporaries and successors whom it would be tedious to enumerate, the genius of Shakespeare not only reigns paramount, but alone, in the domain of dramatic poetry. He is not simply and solely the creature of a widely diffused movement in the spirit of his age and nation, not merely the central orb of a luminous solar system pulsating life and light to the worlds which circle round it, but borrowing also something of the native splendour of other planetary bodies; but in a certain sense an inexplicable prodigy, a man of original and unparalleled energy and splendour, who not only floods the literary heavens in "the spacious times of great Elizabeth" with an undying blaze of radiance, but supplies a potent motive force for all future poetic effort. It is unsound and uncritical therefore to speak of him, as some have done on the strength of Jonson's famous allusion, as simply the "Soul of the Age"; the poet, in other words, in whom the fire of the Elizabethan era,—which glows brightly, and, it is alleged, *independently* of him, in such subordinate playwrights as Webster and Fletcher and Ford—men who must be regarded, I think, as

satellites and vassals of the music-making and world-illuminating Olympian, although confessedly satellites of the highest and purest lustre, vassals of titanic calibre and quality,—burns most intensely and reveals itself with most striking effect. Shakespeare is the poet for all time, and not only completes and accomplishes the art of sixteenth-century England, but exists for the pleasure and the profit of all ages to come. Does not Jonson, in the well-worn *éloge* from which I have already quoted, say explicitly that "his art doth give the fashion"; that he is "not *of* an age, but *for* all time"? The obvious meaning of which is, that whilst Shakespeare is indubitably a man of the true Elizabethan mould, he is also essentially a catholic and unconventional poet. Like Saint Paul, he is in the world of his own day; but he is not of it. He lives, as the case has been well put, "in an intellectual sphere above it," and so lives and writes for it and for all time.[1] And the distance between Shakespeare and all other dramatists—Sophocles, Calderon, Corneille, Alfieri, Schiller,—is after all so vast and immeasurable, that to compare any other with him would be as fatuous and as futile as to compare the largest planet in our sidereal system with that central orb round which all the splendours of the universe revolve, and which sways the minutest motions of a mighty scheme of circling worlds. He eclipses the dramatists of his day, and of all other days, as completely as Epicurus, in the opinion at least of Lucretius, eclipses all philosophers. This I frankly and unhesitatingly affirm once for all as my unchangeable creed.

III.

The absolute supremacy of Shakespeare's genius, then, presupposes the possession of all those attributes which most certainly contribute to abiding greatness. With all poets of the first rank he has essentially an affinity. And in them there is always to be found something of his exalted spirit or truth of substance or distinction of style. Wherefore I do not lay much stress upon the particular resemblances discoverable in the seven writers

[1] Dr C. M. Ingleby, 'Shakespeare: The Man and the Book,' 1877, Pt. I. 108.

named. In no special sense are they differentiated from other great poets so far as the *spirit* of Shakespeare is concerned. It would be easy indeed to form a kind of poetical Pleiades (equally suitable for my purpose although necessarily fanciful and arbitrary, as that of the Greeks under Ptolemy or that formed by the French in imitation of it during the reign of Henry II.) out of any other seven stars of the first magnitude which brighten the European literary heavens with "cressets of immortal fire." But there is one poet in the list given with whom, more than with any other poet ancient or modern, Shakespeare has the strongest and most obvious affinity; whom it is impossible to overlook or underrate in any such connection. I mean Chaucer, our "first warbler," whose dawning gave promise not only of a new language but of the glorious days of English Drama, the chief blossoming of Elizabethan literature. For I am not one of those who accept the doctrine that he is deficient in true dramatic power. On the contrary, "he observes characters, notes their differences, studies the coherence of their parts, endeavours to describe living individualities,"—a thing unheard of and unattempted in his time, but which the poets of Elizabeth were destined to do a century and a half later;[1] and thus by his romance-poetry and his gallery of Rubens-like pictures he has an affinity with the master-spirits of the Renaissance, who also taught through images of life without any profession of didactic purpose, and developed a sense of Literature transfigured and raised into an Art.

A long interval of gloom and barrenness and political confusion certainly lies between the age of Chaucer, who, half in and half out of the Middle Ages, rose in the glorious epoch of Edward III.'s reign as the bright and morning star of English song, and the sixteenth century of our era, when Shakespeare with his puissant and full-orbed genius blazed into celebrity as the supreme and unerring exponent of the inner truths of human life. Yet it is as certain that a bond of intellectual connection exists between the art of these two strangely differing periods as that the spirit of the Elizabethan era survives in and assists the æsthetical development of the Victorian age—a genuine and enduring source

[1] See Taine, 'History of English Literature,' 1873, i. 203.

of joy and strength still. This fact is present to the mind of Lord Tennyson when, in his exquisite poem "A Dream of Fair Women," he sings of the elder poet as of one whose sweet breath

> "Preluded those melodious bursts that fill
> The spacious times of great Elizabeth
> With sounds that echo still."

Chaucer is indisputably the "true forerunner and prototype of Shakespeare." And Shakespeare is the special inheritor of the aim, the manner, the tradition of Chaucer. In Chaucer are to be found all the essential germs of the Elizabethan drama of real life. And the poetry of Shakespeare discovers a spirit and a purpose entirely in sympathy with the poetry of the fourteenth century. Each of course expresses himself according to the bent of his own disposition, according to the original gift of his own epoch; but there are certain qualities of sovereign excellence which these makers possess in common which not only mark them out as men of the same lineage, inspired with the like genius, but place them far above all the other great poets of our language. In the writings of the Edwardian and Elizabethan poet there is to be discovered the same positive, coherent, wholesome, and sanely realistic representation of things—not merely picturesque descriptions, but the things themselves, throbbing with pulses and powers before our eyes; the same power of conceiving characters that are at once broadly human and definitely outlined—a power which has given rise, in the case of the dramatic poet, to a question which might be applied with equal force to the work of the narrative poet, as to whether each separate character delineated is, as Pope affirmed, to be regarded as a mere individual, or, as Johnson argued, as the representative of an entire species; and the same harmonious union or complete interpenetration of true tragic and comic and pathetic powers,—that highest endowment of poetic genius by virtue of which Chaucer and Shakespeare stand alone in our literature, first and pre-eminent among the masters of English song.

Nor do we fail to find in the performances of this glorious pair the same majestic enunciation of spiritual and eternal truth; the

same wide and swift and deep sympathy with human action and human suffering; the same overwhelming sense of the mystery and pathos of things strictly finite and mundane; the same high mastery of human passion; the same unsparing exposure of the existing social order; the same grand note of freedom, of personal assertion, of contest and protest in behalf of humanity and in defence of truth. For I think that there will be no dissent among those who have approached nearest to Chaucer and Shakespeare, when it is said that a most essential characteristic of their work is an ever-flowing and overrunning fulness of pure English feeling. The true breath of freedom blows as certainly through the "Manciple's Tale" as it does through the historical drama of "King John." In the pictured reminiscences of the Plantagenet poet it is necessarily fainter and less diffusive than in the grand and sombre productions of the Tudor poet. This is to be explained by the fact that, whilst in the Elizabethan age the reason and conscience had been emancipated by the two great movements of the Renaissance and Reformation, which unfettered thought and action from the brutalities of feudalism, liberated the human spirit from medieval bondage, and gave birth to new conceptions of social culture, new theories of state, new systems of education, new developments of Christian doctrine, all of which proclaimed the equality of mankind in the community of rights and duties, every description of impediment and restraint upon the spontaneity and free development of the idea or principle of individual liberty and the reciprocal and coextensive character of rights and duties existed in the epoch of Edward III.'s reign. Still the idea is there, and it is presented as the root of all individual rights, the end and object of all citizen duties, the only element in which a reasonable English soul can exist. In a word, Chaucer, who had a vague forefeeling of the great destiny which was due to his nation, and Shakespeare, who saw and felt what is thus dimly foreshadowed in the noblest literature of the pre-Renaissance ages, are touched by the same fire. Their poetry is remarkable for its heroic vein and enthusiastic love of country, its strenuous confidence and manly self-possession and practical good sense, its single-handed grasp of national characteristics, and

its vivid and vigorous utterance of national sentiments. It mirrors, in a word, the life, the thoughts, and passions of the English people.

No competent critic who has given due study to the genius of these writers can fail to see and to feel this. It is often said that they are cosmopolitan poets, omnipresent spirits. Yes; but nevertheless it is easy to determine where their nationality lies. Chaucer and Shakespeare may veil or mask their personality. But neither the one nor the other can vanquish the influences of climate or resist the grip of the world and the pressure of the age into which he is born. If you say that the earlier master is deeply indebted to Dante and Petrarch and Boccaccio and to the early lyric poets of Italy, or that he is the most perfect type in our language of the Norman-French Trouvères, you must also allow that he is the best representative of the true English mind in "its best possible temper." This was an acknowledged fact even in Elizabeth's day, when it was fashionable to "talk pure Chaucer."[1] And if you say that the mightier maker derives his poetic materials and draws his inspiration very largely from similar sources, you must also admit that he personifies English genius in its fulness, and represents all that is strong and tender, wise and delicate, elevated and learned, in the palmiest and most prolific period of our modern civilisation.

Or, to put the matter in another way: Whilst incarnating, on the one hand, the spirit of an entire epoch of the European world, whilst embodying a whole European phase of thought and feeling in a specific form of art, the poetry of Chaucer or of Shakespeare is essentially the home-product of the English people; and whilst, on the other hand, it has indubitably a well-marked stamp of insularity upon it, they are men of a nature so singularly uncontemporaneous that they are capable of making extinct types and obsolete manners familiar objects to the mental vision of all readers. They never cease to be English to the innermost fibre of their thought. But in the truest sense they escape from being *insular* simply by allowing their lofty and wide-viewing minds to

[1] See Ruskin, 'Oxford Lectures on Art,' 1880, 15; and compare Coleridge *ut supra*, 509.

ith airy lightness from the Particular—that is, the solid ls of their own race and epoch—to the abiding and the sal, by which I mean the natural impulses, the primitive s, the habitual prejudices, and the permanent interests of ity in general. Thus their characters are not poetic fig- or mental phantasms or even mere actual possibilities. re real human beings, warm-breathing realities, each dis- marked out in itself and illuminated by an intense light, ypes true to the likeness of whole classes of men and , or to the mould in which all human nature is cast." Such vigour and felicity of perception and their hearty love of earthly life, such their penetrating and sympathetic insight eir wise knowledge of the interior nature of humanity and enduring and essential in it, that the characters delineated n continue contemporary and familiar for ever, not only to of their own country, but of their own civilisation.

poem of the "Canterbury Tales," if we follow the plain id down by so competent a metrist as Coleridge for sound- e final *e* of syllables, &c., is no more obsolete, after the of four centuries, than the tragedy of "Othello"; and llo" no more so than the Tennysonian "Idylls," if allow- s made for certain quirks of thought and speech and an ly figurative style or impassioned form of expression adopted the leading playwrights of the time—a notable example of is to be found in the first act of "Othello" (scene 3, ll. 75)—and which no reader of disciplined taste can fail to ehend, if he pays due heed to the subject and drift of the ue in which these things occur. The figures of Chaucer, he sturdy Franklin, in "whose hous it snewed of mete and "; the sententious Doctor of Physic, "whose studie was el of the Bible"; the poor Wycliffite Parson, "whose parish ide and houses fer asonder"; the bold Wife of Bath, with t and wimple and her unbridled and indomitable tongue; e coarse Summoner, with his "fire-red cherubinnes face," robably suggested to our dramatist the idea of Bardolph in Henry V." with his "face all bubukles, and whelks, and and flames of fire"—like the *dramatis personæ* of Shake-

speare,—the courtiers, the lovers, the travelling players, the ambitious statesmen, the dreamers of dreams, the stately nobles, the plotters of revenge, the dull burgesses, the shrewd fools who move about in his majestic and impassioned imagination with the irresistible comic characters, drawn in his most realistic style from the different classes which he met in ordinary life, both at Stratford and in London, such as Autolycus, Grumio, Shallow, Falstaff, Mercutio, and Dogberry,—impress one's fancy with the momentary credence that they are still alive. We somehow forget that the living prototypes have centuries ago crumbled into dust. They remain distinct in our memory, like the creations of Rubens and of Tintoretto. And thus, whilst the genius of Chaucer and Shakespeare pursues different, even opposite routes, it is impossible for the student-reader to turn his thoughts to either without at once evoking the image of the other as a sort of necessary complement to the first.

IV.

In this way, then, I at length reach the main point which this chapter is designed to elucidate. All the master-spirits of that great intellectual movement of the Renaissance and Reformation period of English life were no doubt animated more or less by what Professor Dowden,—whose services to the study of Shakespeare remain uneclipsed by those of any other contemporary scholar, and to whom every one who now writes on Shakespeare must acknowledge indebtedness,—has felicitously described as "a rich feeling for positive, concrete fact." This, we are told, is the one thing possessed in common by the scientific movement as represented by Bacon, by the ecclesiastical movement as represented by Hooker, and by the literary movement as represented by Shakespeare and his *confrères*. But the immense superiority of Shakespeare's poetry over that of others, the reason why his drama transcends and in a sense effaces that of all his contemporaries and successors, is to be found in the fact that his intuitive knowledge of human nature is wider and more thorough, his grasp of the facts of life surer and firmer, his view of the world

clearer yet kindlier than theirs. Human emotion is rightly felt here, human character is rightly conceived; and thus his drama becomes a life-reflecting mirror, which allows us to enjoy the emotion of seeing things and persons in their unexaggerated truth and beauty.

Apart, then, from native felicity of poetic endowment, this "gracious worldliness" or energetic interest in real transactions, this sternly truthful realism or Chaucerian fidelity to fact, which at once safeguards him from childish credulity and self-torturing unrest, is the essential part of the unique poetic greatness of Shakespeare, who, as "a singer of man to men," lived by, and wrote in, fullest sympathy with the life of Humanity and the whole English people. The secret of his success lies in the fact that his "wisdom finds and grasps men *directly* as men." Or, to put the matter in the plainest words that I can command, his greatness in the main depends on his diligence, his quickness and intensity of conception: on the use he makes of his eyes and the faith he has in his own perceptions. He sees and feels and reproduces, without surplus or deficiency, nature and character, and every phase of human life and thought. His eye for facts, and the singular pertinacity with which he refuses to be dislodged from his hold upon them; his ever-active sense of truth, and his keen perception of all the circumstances and complexities of our earthly existence; his unrivalled aptitude for realising the vital concrete facts of society and the ultimate truths of human character and conduct, and his capacity for marshalling these inductively; together with the closely connected faculty of a large, creative, and unshackled imagination, which allows him to rise above the fleeting forms of transitory things to a grasp upon eternal principles, and enables him to "summon into an ideal life the complex passions that agitate universal humanity,"—these are the salient attributes of his genius, which jointly contribute to give him the leadership of the modern world.

What Shakespeare most cares for is Humanity in active and passionate exercise; human character in its real and living play; the soul or moral life of man as it develops and manifests itself to the world in deeds. Men and women, swayed by complex and

manifold impulses, are his special and constant study. And so engrossed is he in the acquisition of facts concerning human nature and human destiny, that in his objective drama all idea of subject and object, teleology and the Unities, are rigorously excluded from consideration.[1] It is true that from the very outset, not only as regards plot and characters but as regards æsthetic form and ethical effect—for, remember, the enduring strength of our poet really lies in the predominance of the moral element in his nature, and not in any mere plot-constructing power or image-forming talent—Shakespeare has his purpose straight and full before him; so much so indeed that from the introductory scenes, as in "Othello," it is possible to map out the route he will take and the end he will come to; whilst his conceptive energy is such that everything with which his mind is brought into contact immediately becomes plastic to his preconceived design. Still, all settled rules of art are sacrificed to salience of presentation, to the one great unity of *tone*, if I may so speak, both as regards plot and characters, thought and action. Shakespeare's drama is a

[1] I grasp the opportunity of a footnote to observe that in "Othello" the time-scheme is much at fault. If examined critically it will be found that not a single moment is allowed in which the supposed intrigue between Cassio and Desdemona could possibly have taken place; and that in its action "there are two undetermined intervals which precede the final rush of the plot to its fierce conclusion." In such cases one must have recourse to the formula that Shakespeare *treated time ideally*. Or, in plainer speech, that he did not bother himself about the Unities, of which, as Sir Walter Scott observes in his "Essay on the Drama," Aristotle says so little, and his commentators and followers talk so much. Shakespeare's real feeling as to the Unities leaks out in one ironical speech which he puts into the mouth of the pompous and pragmatical Polonius as he announces the arrival of the players to the Prince.. From what is there said it is clear that he held by the view that the observance or violation of the classical rules mattered very little, and that the value of a drama depended upon deeper causes than those which are associated with the names of Aristotle and Seneca and Plautus. In some of his plays our poet certainly observes the ancient rules of art. The "Tempest," for example, is a very regular play as regards the law of the Unities of Time and Place: "Richard II." is a tragedy without any admixture of comedy; and the same remark applies to "Macbeth," if we except the Porter's scene, so much admired by De Quincey on metaphysical grounds, but which some critics, Coleridge among the number, regard as an interpolation, although it seems to me to be in perfect harmony with the essential spirit of Shakespeare. In

spectacle of life. It is this and nothing more. Yet it is a spectacle that gives a new meaning to life, and adds a fresh beauty to nature.

Shakespeare is a man of the world, a man of action, a man who delights in reality. And although by the all-compulsive force of his genius he discloses to us the inward world of man's moral and spiritual nature, and by an inexplicable and incommunicable gift of clairvoyance lays bare the inmost virtue of human life, his dramatic method is in strict speech essentially objective. He has the dæmonic faculty, intensely developed, which is so indispensable to all high poetic production. But he is also armed with the practical knowledge of a great life actually experienced, which is likewise necessary to successful dramatic authorship. In a certain sense his poetry is as much the result of immediate environment as of aboriginal might, or, in Shelley's admirable phrase, "unapprehended inspiration"; albeit he is not at the mercy of current ideas or vulgar ambitions, but pursues a fixed purpose and is master of himself.

Life upon the homely earth, what may be termed *common life*,

"Hamlet," however, the poet ignores the Unity of Time: the hero takes a sea-voyage in the time occupied by a part of the fourth act. In "Othello" he ignores the Unity of Place: the scene changes in a trice from the streets of Venice to the island of Cyprus. In "Romeo and Juliet," in "King Lear," in "Macbeth," in "Hamlet," and in "Othello," he ignores the Unity of Action; for each of these plays commences with a kind of catastrophe and then "works up to a second climax, upon which the last curtain falls." To explain Shakespeare's position it is perhaps best to say that he trusted to the imagination of his audience to amend what may be regarded as the inevitable defects of theatrical representation. As Theseus, Duke of Athens, philosophically remarks of the primitive play of "Pyramis and Thisbe" in "A Midsummer Night's Dream" (v. 1)—"The best in this kind are but shadows; and the worst are no worse, if imagination amend them." Our poet was the least *doctrinaire* or theory-loving of men; and the only "unity" he really cared about was consistency and coherency of thought, action, and character;—that which forms the strict and indispensable rule of pure art, and, in dramatic poetry, creates the one great unity of interest and impression. On the points here touched, see Stapfer, 'Shakespeare and Classical Antiquity,' 1880, chap. iii.; an article by Mr Hall Caine on "Two Aspects of Shakespeare's Art," in 'Contemporary' for June 1883, 896; and an article by Mr H. A. Clapp on "Time in Shakespeare's Plays," in 'Atlantic Monthly' for March 1885, 390, and for April, 556 *seqq.*

is therefore invariably the basis and the mainstay of his greatest representations. The pulse of the everyday world, the familiar "stir of existence," beat and echo in his dramas. Like all great artists, like Michelangelo, who with his own hands dug out of the Pope's gardens behind the Vatican the red and yellow ochres wherewith to paint in fresco—"of which art," it is said, he then "knew nothing,"—the sibyls and the prophets of the Sistine Chapel, Shakespeare works with the materials nearest him, and adheres closely to the life before his eyes. Men and women, influenced by well-defined, even familiar, passions — love and hatred, jealousy and revenge, pride and envy, lawless ambition and unbridled self-will—pass before us. These are the common yet potent influences which affect and afflict Romeo and Juliet, Iago and Othello, Macbeth and King Lear; and they operate upon these personages very much as like impulses sway people in these days. The exhibition of human experience, the working of violent and irregular impulses, which betray the deepest springs of human action, rather than elaborate speculations concerning the inner meaning of life, is what we find rendered in Shakespearian Drama. To this end all the resources of his unrivalled genius, and all the various but wonderfully blent elements of his art, are impartially subordinated. It is no part of his business to explain and prove. The ultimate significance of the deeper aspects of life is not revealed but suggested. He deals, as I have already shown, with the deepest mysteries of life and conduct, but not as Wordsworth does in long-drawn substantive poems, but in brief digressions or in sudden individual flashes of poetry. As a rule, the great facts of spiritual existence are not minutely detailed or described by him, but are left to be broadly discovered by us. In an age when scholarship was a passion and speculative philosophy was energetically cultivated, when wars and schisms were convulsing Europe, and when in England, which in full measure had felt the fierce struggle and secured the mighty rewards of Renaissance life, the new was still struggling with the obsolescent faith, it is remarkable that a mind so open to impressions should have excluded from productions so well adapted for their display everything like direct religious comment, or

marked political intention, or even deliberate moralising. On these subjects his mouth is almost closed. Not, observe, from any incapacity of dealing with them — the few utterances that *do* occur sufficiently demonstrate that—but from a natural and invincible dislike to touch anything that lies beyond the purely human province of which he knew himself to be the universal master.[1]

V.

Shakespeare gives us vivid images in place of abstract formulas—a series of actions instead of a number of intelligible propositions—and aims, as a rule, at the manifestation of human life as a complex whole rather than at the psychological dissection of individual character. He is, moreover, seldom if ever tempted to individualise in a mere personal sense. His eye is ever on the alert; and his mind is so capacious in natural sympathy that nothing is alien or uninteresting to him that belongs to man. He observes life in all its variety before he attempts to delineate it; and "in the sphere of man's mixed nature" there is nothing save what is base and soul-corrupting—for in the final analysis it will be found that Shakespeare's manhood is without taint, and that with all his "gift in taciturnity" he cannot hide his moral nature from his muse—which is unportrayed by him in his imperishable masterpieces. Whilst he grasps and comprehends every salient and animating motive in the sphere of man's experience, the representation and not the discussion of motives is the rule of his art. We can of course construct the motive-thought from the action of his dramatic personages. But the exhibition of the motive-thought is not the primary intention of the poet. His declared design is simply and solely, in the well-worn words of Hamlet to the players, "to hold as 'twere the mirror up to nature; to show virtue her own feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure." His drama is therefore essentially objective: its basis, as has been repeatedly observed, is strictly

[1] See Saintsbury, 'History of Elizabethan Literature,' 168; also Symonds *ut supra*, 6.

human and mundane. He is constantly in fresh and loving contact with nature. The arch-mystery of his muse is the mystery of the Demeter, "from whose bosom we came, and to whose bosom we return." This it is which surrounds and inspires, nourishes and sustains his art. All the inexhaustible attributes of his many-sided nature are devoted to the realisation of the positive facts of the world as these concern the complex life of humankind.

Wherefore each play is a microcosm which renders a true likeness of the World and Human Life. Everything comes immediately from nature; and the convincing proof of its truth and beauty lies at the bottom of our own heart. Even the purely imaginative accessories of his characters in no sense diminish the verisimilitude of his delineations. For with the superficial or accidental elements there is mixed up so much that is permanent and structural that in certain moods we come to think and speak even of the emotional Romeo and the mendacious Falstaff and the misanthropical Timon as old acquaintances, tinged somehow with the secret colours of our own spirit. They never fail to impress themselves upon the mind with a singular and immediate definiteness. We never doubt their reality. For what they tell of life is always full, precise, trustworthy. And what can be more real to us than the events of "Othello"? Whether or not historically true, they have in them more force of reality than the events of the "Iliad," or the "Agamemnon," or the "Œdipus Rex," whose *vraisemblance* we never think of calling in question. Who is more natural than Henry, or Hamlet, or Hector, or Hotspur? What a quintessence of nature fills each one of these forms! They are as natural to our appreciations as the historical Cæsar, or Bacon, or Napoleon, or Frederick. And what scenes are more likely or lifelike than the garden-scene in "Romeo and Juliet," or the sleep-walking scene in "Macbeth," or the murder-scene in "Othello"? They are as much of the world as the world is of us; as real as Etna or the Alps to those who have never actually seen them. How seldom has Shakespeare departed from nature, or falsified fact, or violated probability! It matters very little that by an anachronism Hector argues from Aristotle and Hamlet

swears by St Patrick. The essentials of human character are realised and revealed in these delineations. And the plays in which they figure, taken as a whole—events, characters, and scenes together—are documents of human history whose truth and validity can never be disputed.

VI.

In what has been written the primary aims of our poet, the chief attributes of his dramatic genius, and the causes which contribute to give him his artistic supremacy, have, I think, been made sufficiently clear. He presents a complex, perfect, and intensely coloured abstract picture of Humanity, or, in other words, reproduces the life of men around him, and exhibits the combination of Humanity in action. He interprets human nature to itself and succeeds in awakening in us a new, full, and intimate sense of our own inner being, with all its aims, hopes, wishes, aspirations, and passions. He discovers to us the primary human affections and duties, the familiar facts of daily experience and the grander objects of nature, or the finite world in its totality. The most salient attribute of his active, powerful, far-sighted genius, therefore, is what is properly defined as resolute fidelity to positive concrete fact, or a masterly grasp of the realities of life, of those common things which are still things of supreme interest —the deeds, the sufferings, the aspirations of men like ourselves. And he rises far above his precursors and contemporaries, simply by virtue of his facile and unequalled touch on human feeling, and the larger and deeper and more perfect knowledge of the essential qualities of man's nature, permanent and universal, which he possesses; whilst the spontaneity, freedom, and vast compass of his productive or creative imagination, which, according to the Hamiltonian philosophy, involves the operations both of the representative and of the elaborative faculties, or the power not only of imitating given forms of being but of imagining and representing new ones,—so that from a study of his drama, which is essentially objective, we can still enjoy the emotion of seeing

the ideal world emblemed forth in the real: the stern realities of life transfigured and glorified by the glamour and capricious enchantments of his poetic genius—together with the closely connected qualities of ardent emotion, and the inborn force and fire of spiritual life, mental lucidity, and a natural and unerring sense of what is right and beautiful in nature and in human action and suffering, have given to him his poetic ascendancy and the leadership of the modern world. It must be acknowledged, however, that it is not the predominating force of any one faculty that impresses us in Shakespeare; but the general force of all.

VII.

Before quitting this branch of my theme, let me say that there are three popular definitions of the nature and function of poetry which, taken together,—for although they are sufficiently well marked the ultimate divergence between them is perhaps not very great after all,—may be accepted as a fair description of the fundamental characteristic of Shakespeare's dramatic art. Mr Matthew Arnold, speaking of Homer, says that poetry is the application of noble and profound ideas to life under the conditions immutably fixed by the laws of poetic beauty and poetic truth, or, in a word, that poetry is a profound criticism of life.[1] Mr Alfred Austin, again, defines it as "a transfiguration of life." And a French critic, whose name I forget, has recently spoken of it somewhere, as the expression of the aspiring element in life—*l'expression de l'aspiration de la vie.* Any of these definitions, which seem to have been unconsciously modelled on the memorable dictum of Milton, who taught the relationship of poetry to life when he said that he who would write a heroic poem must lead a heroic life, might with strict propriety be applied to the dramatic poetry of Shakespeare. I prefer the first, however, as being after all the plainest in its terms and the most comprehensive in its scope. The oft-quoted formula of the "criticism of life" is probably a somewhat unfortunate and debatable phrase,

[1] See 'Essays in Criticism,' Second Series, 1888, 141.

since from its too rigid precision it suggests the opposition that seems naturally to exist between poetry—which is intrinsically ideal, and implies and presupposes a free creative activity—and what is commonly spoken of as "criticism," which, whilst providing perhaps the true means and materials for the purposes of the poetic craftsman, is indubitably a power of lower rank, infested, as Emerson says, with "a cant of materialism." Nevertheless it briefly expresses, I think, that specific quality of subject which we demand of the very highest poetry, and teaches the close and intimate connection of poetry with life. The main aim and end of all Shakespeare's utterance is incontestably a noble, just, and profound criticism of life: an interpretation of the world and human nature "made conformably to the laws of poetic beauty and poetic truth;" persons, events, and things all falling into their proper places as parts, or correlated manifestations, of that complex organism which we call Life. So that, the poet having, in addition to a sure and steady grasp and comprehension of the objective realities of the actual world and the passing phenomena of ordinary existence, a keen sense of the innermost life of humanity and the mystic relation between the world without us and the world within, together with the supreme poetic power of "subordinating nature for the purposes of expression" or of conforming, by an ulterior intellectual perception, all external things to his own thoughts, the formula invented by Mr Arnold may be said to include what is implied in the other definitions cited. That is to say, it is the primary function of Shakespearian poetry to be "the mirror not of one man's soul, but of the life of all men reflected through that soul;" and therefore by virtue of its manifold vitality it necessarily becomes not only a criticism which traverses the whole scale of experience, but a transfiguration or idealisation of life, and an expression of the aspiring element in universal human nature.

CHAPTER VI.

THE POET IN RELATION TO HIS PLOTS.

I.

LET us, remaining at this point of view, now glance at the guiding and governing motives which, as indicated in my second chapter, Shakespeare has before him when he sets to work. In the first place, he aims at telling in every play a dramatically complete story. Having suffered himself to be persuaded by custom and prejudice that plots are necessary, the poet is not over-particular in the selection of a story which will furnish the groundwork of his play and afford him scope for the development of character. Shakespeare is pre-eminently great in description, in telling a story that is dramatically complete, albeit several of his plays—notably "Henry V.," "A Midsummer Night's Dream," "Cymbeline," and "The Winter's Tale"—are strung on the loosest threads of dramatic continuity; whilst, according to a certain strain of criticism, of which Mr J. A. Symonds is perhaps the most distinguished representative, the design even of "Othello" is almost puerile in its simplicity. He has the story-teller's gift of awakening and retaining interest. But he sets little value upon plot-construction; and certainly never solicits his invention or strains his faculties in this regard, like his ingenious contemporary Jonson or the Gaborieaus or Du Boisgobeys of modern French fiction.

This, without committing myself entirely to the forecited opinion, is especially true of the play which forms the subject of

the present study. In the true sense of the word there is, so far as the entanglement and disentanglement of the outward circumstances, relations, and incidents of the play are concerned, very little *invention* in "Othello." In the action there is hardly anything like *external* complication. The whole interest may be said to revolve around the internal conflict in the minds of the principal *personæ*, Iago and Desdemona and the Moor, whose outward position is the simple and inevitable consequence of their own characters; whose fate, emanating originally from the will, is completely a thing of their own making. The plot is an interior organism, not an external contrivance. The character in Greek tragedy is wholly involved in the action; whilst, generally speaking, the whole action is here evolved from the character. With the ancients, as Mr Lowell has remarked, the motive of the play controls the personages; but with the sovran poet of Romantic Drama "the chief personages are in themselves the motive to which all else is subsidiary." [1]

Shakespeare, in short, makes everything depend on the individuality and variety of human impulses of the acting personages, out of whose inmost character and principles, therefore, the complication of the plot, such as it is, arises.

His real strength, as has been shown, lies in idiomatic sharpness, in masterly reading of the inmost depths of nature, in vigorous conception and vitality of delineation. And, knowing full well that by his "so potent art" he can make the dry bones live again, he borrows, like Beaumont and Fletcher and Goethe, the materials of his poems from those classical fables and Gothic romances and chivalrous tales which were most widely known and esteemed in his time. Wherefore no competent critic would ever think of claiming even for Shakespeare any absolute originality. In this respect he occupies a position similar to that held by all the great masters; by Homer and Plato, by Chaucer and Byron, who put all nations and all authors under contribution, and absorb into their own sphere "all the light which is anywhere radiating." His sources are to be found in the historical and imaginative literature of the period. And not only does he found his plots on

[1] See 'Essays on the English Poets,' 1888, 122.

subjects previously familiar to his countrymen,—"Romeo and Juliet," "Measure for Measure," and "As You Like It" may suffice for examples of stories which had already appeared in popular poems or collections of tales,—but in many instances he freely avails himself of the inventions of his precursors, and even selects subjects which had already been *dramatically* handled by them. As examples of the marvellous facility with which he adopts and adapts the ready-made plots of luckless playwrights, three of his masterpieces may be cited,—"Hamlet," "King Lear," and "Julius Cæsar." In all of these the characterless and unsouled personages of pre-existent dramas are endued with the blood and breath of real existence, and presented as distinct personalities or types of humanity, in whom we discover the utmost complexity of human attributes and the most delicate gradations of human passions. The dross of the wretched play-model is in each case transmuted by the alchemy of his puissant genius, that quickly perceives all the latent capabilities which the original story possesses for free and high artistic handling, into the pure ore and the lucid beauty of the most flawless and light-darting poetry. Shakespeare knows how to borrow; and, "like the rovers before Minos," he is never ashamed of his piracy. For he adds a fresh beauty to everything that he touches, expands the germ of truth already pre-existing, develops and exalts the situation and the scenic circumstances so rudely outlined in earlier dramas, and quadruples the force of current ideas. Oftentimes the primary conception of his delineation is to be found in history or in some artistic product of a time anterior to his own. Yet it always issues from his mind a pure creation of art, a character which belongs to Shakespeare alone. Hence we forget the innumerable labourers who minister to this supreme artist, and reserve all our gratitude for him who takes up into himself all arts and all sciences as his food, and, like Adonais, becomes one with Nature, from whose teaching in reality all his wonders come.

II.

It is still uncertain what kind of culture this man of widest acquirement possessed. But one thing is tolerably clear, that he was neither in strict speech a classical scholar nor an original *raconteur*. The one dramatic gift which he lacks is the power of constructing original stories. Just as the classicism, which is more or less present in all his works, but which was specially required for the æsthetic nourishment of such plays as "Troilus and Cressida" (where he treats of the actual subject of the 'Iliad,' and represents, with much fancifulness and irreverence, however, the very world of Homer) and "Timon of Athens" (which has little trace of the true Greek spirit or of the local colouring of Greece), or the great trilogy of "Julius Cæsar," "Coriolanus," and "Antony and Cleopatra" (in which the essential features of the ruder character of the Roman people are reproduced with matchless realistic verisimilitude), was in every case drawn second-hand from translations, such as Chapman's 'Homer,' North's 'Plutarch,' and Florio's 'Montaigne,' which contains of itself more classical knowledge than was required for Shakespeare's purposes, to say nothing of the Attic tragedians, who were made familiar by the versions or adaptations of Seneca; or, just as the prodigious wealth of togated words, and expressions and allusions derived from foreign sources, which are to be found everywhere in his plays, and which eighteenth-century pedants alleged, in proof of his "broad and deep erudition," were borrowed directly from the then untranslated Greek and Roman writers, were rife in the published English works of his contemporaries,—notably in 'Lilly's Grammar,' which the poet used at the Guild School in Stratford-on-Avon,[1]—even so the general material of bare fact required for the building up of his art-structure is borrowed from Plutarch, Paynter, and Da Porto, from Bandello and Belleforest, from Cinthio and Holinshed, from whom he not only takes incidents

[1] Facts first brought to light by Dr Farmer in 1766, in his interesting "Essay on the Learning of Shakespeare"; and since supplemented by M. Paul Stapfer in his 'Shakespeare and Classical Antiquity,' published in 1880.

and lines of character, but extracts with reverent care words, sentences, and even passages of considerable length, after the manner of Ben Jonson, who puts into the mouths of the *dramatis personæ* of his "Catiline" and "Sejanus" the very *ipsissima verba* of the Roman historians Tacitus and Suetonius.

Shakespeare seldom treats of the immediate events and passing incidents of the day, or works up matter of his own personal experience. But, like his great rival, he follows the main facts of the narrative which he selects as the framework of his drama. Observe, however, the extraordinary poetic power with which he accomplishes the embodiment of the rude unshapen data of such writers as were then accessible to him, and gives an imaginative rendering of the facts prosaically described by them. The story, derived from English chronicles, or Italian novels, or Sagas of the North, always passes in bright transfiguration from his mind; a thing elevated and re-created into a finished original organic structure, bearing little or no resemblance to the bald narrative which he has selected for his dramatic purposes.

This is especially true of the Comedies, the chief characters of which are hardly ever taken from other men's sketches. But the remark applies with almost equal force to the tragedy of "Othello," which is something more than a dramatic revivification of the ill-constructed and unsouled composition of Giraldi Cinthio, who, it is obvious, was an unskilful artist, albeit there is a certain ingenuity and terse simplicity displayed in the conception and unfolding of the story. Shakespeare not only deviated in several places from the Italian novel, which he probably read in the original or else made use of the French translation of 1584, as no English translation appeared prior to 1795; but by his creative fantasy so improves upon the coarse naturalness of his original as to make of it one of the most perfect and effective examples of Romantic Drama.

III.

Let me give three examples of his reconstructive genius. In the first place, whilst Iago, according to Cinthio, is a coward, the Iago of our play is represented as a being of undoubted bravery. Cassio expressly calls him "the bold Iago." And there can be little difficulty, I think, in determining the object which Shakespeare had in view in making this deviation from the line of character pursued in the novel, where his reputed cowardice certainly answers no end. The poet gives prominence to the blunt, outspoken, soldierly qualities of the Ancient only in order to furnish a plausible ground or reason for the good opinion which the too credulous Moor entertains respecting him. Or, as the case has been well put, to rescue the intellect of Othello "from the last degradation of mistaking a poltroon for a hero, as well as a villain for an honest man." By this improvement Shakespeare provides for the action a strict logical consistency, and secures the dramatic completeness of his story.

In the second place, he further improves upon the original by introducing Emilia, who is therein described as a "bella ed onesta giovane" — the friend but not the attendant of the General's wife: the person who, according to Cinthio, circumstantially relates the story of 'Il Moro di Venezia,'—as the dupe of the Ancient in stealing Desdemona's handkerchief, to which the novelist, however, imputes no magical virtue, describing it simply as a valued possession "very delicately worked in the Moorish taste." It is Emilia, not Iago as in the tale, who, yielding to the oft-repeated importunity of her husband, steals this "first remembrance from the Moor"; and only, as herself explains, "to please his fantasy." Here again it is not difficult, I think, to discover the reason which weighed with Shakespeare in making this improvement on Cinthio's narrative. Our dramatist, be it remembered, begins at the heart of a character and works outwards. He conceives his persons, as has been said, in their rudiments and first principles. And all the resources of his art are primarily directed to maintain the ethical

and ideal integrity or the perfect consistency of their individual natures. In all circumstances he delivers the whole and pure truth respecting them; makes plain to us what is rightly characteristic of them; and, with unrivalled ease and directness, reveals the inmost springs and actuating principles of their moral being. And although his characters are never in a fixed, but always, so to speak, in a formative state, you rarely discover through all the ever-changing lines and shades of human transpiration any conscious, voluntary, and permanent departure from the primary mood to one that is essentially antipathetic to it. This is abundantly proved by the course of action pursued by the chief personages in all his ideal tragedies. In his great delineations, and in everything that comes from his *personæ*, with all the circumstances and influences under which they are represented as acting, there is always to be found the most natural coherence and the most exquisite ethical congruity.

It is also a noteworthy fact that in his plots the poet only departs from tradition in order to perfect his types, and discards his model only when the claims of poetry imperatively demand a departure from strict historical truth.[1] Thus, as regards the character of Iago, Emilia's unthinking complicity becomes necessary in order to illustrate and illuminate it; just as his pride of intellect is strengthened by the contrasted pride of purse in Roderigo, or as the unreflecting passion of Desdemona is more markedly revealed by the fatal consequences which result from it to Brabantio. Shakespeare so selects and arranges, or alters and improves, the salient facts of the original narrative, that in *everything* Iago moves and manifests himself precisely as the predetermined law of his individuality—as that is disclosed in the introductory scenes—requires. In the list of persons represented the Ancient is described as "Iago, a Villain"; and in the play he habitually and consistently acts as such. The poet, with a quick and sure insight into the inevitable workings of the Iagoish mind, and with an intuitive perception of the exact æsthetic forms requisite for its clear and complete unfolding, at

[1] See an article by Mr Hall Caine in the 'Contemporary' for June 1883, 890, entitled, "Two Aspects of Shakespeare's Art."

once rejects the clumsy and unpoetical device of Cinthio, and substitutes one more in harmony with the essential nature of the character. He recognises that for such a being to purloin the strawberry-spotted napkin—that fatal heirloom of Othello's Morean ancestry—from Desdemona whilst she is playing with *his* child,—"a little girl of three years old that is much caressed by Desdemona," as the novel informs us,—would not only be an eminently ineffective dramatic incident in itself, but one that would necessarily do violence to the integrity and coherence of Iago's character, inasmuch as it would imply and presuppose that *as a father* he possesses some of the tenderer feelings and finer sensibilities of our nature, albeit he is throughout represented as a cold, loveless, unimpressible, and essentially malignant being, who wins and maintains his ascendancy over every one with whom he comes into contact by the mere emphasis and stress of an intellect that is hard and trenchant, passionless and matter of fact.

As with Lady Macbeth, so here with Iago, Shakespeare aggravates and accentuates the cast-iron remorselessness of his implacable nature by the simple yet effective device of separating him entirely from the innocence and purity of ideal childhood, which with our poet, as with Raphael in his Sistine altarpiece, is the central point of rest in his picture of human life. He inexorably shuts him out from the serene and simple realm of childhood; from the one kind of companionship which, whilst it is in no degree intellectual, is still capable of evoking in the maturest mind a fond and desiring sadness, and of making men wiser and happier and better. The offices and tenderness of maternity, associated as these things are with acts and words of direst cruelty, must of necessity be regarded as at variance with the callous and untamable nature of Lady Macbeth; otherwise, as it seems to me, the delineation falls short of that artistic completeness or congruity which we claim for the character-studies of our poet. And I think that it would have been quite as great an anomaly had Shakespeare invested a nature so relentless and savagely independent as Iago's with the common-life sympathies of flesh and blood. Their malignity and sinister ambition, their

iron-ribbed self-collectedness and absorbing conceit in their own power, render Iago and Lady Macbeth alike inaccessible to any salutary spasm of gracious sorrow or saving pang of moral anguish or self-purifying flame of disinterested love. Wherefore, with singular propriety, they are represented as childless; as beings who have no parental affection, no actual connection or sympathy with the rectitude and innocence of child-life. This simple fact, one of Shakespeare's minute betrayals of character, springing rather from nature than from reflection,—although deliberately accentuated by the after-speech of Macduff when he utters that wonderful line of endless meaning, "*He* has no children,"—increases the dramatic effect of the story and heightens its probability.

But, in the third place, it is in the conclusion of the tragedy that Shakespeare has deviated most markedly from the Italian story. According to Cinthio, Desdemona is killed, not by Othello, who is presented only as an accessory before and after the fact, but by Iago, who, for this purpose, uses a stocking filled with sand—*una calza piena di rena.* And in order to conceal the crime they are represented in the novel as pulling down, according to a preconcerted plan, a part of the ceiling of the room upon the dead body, having first *spezzatate la testa.* The Moor having called for help as the house is falling, the neighbours assemble and discover Desdemona lying dead beneath the beams.[1] Thereafter the Moor, mourning her loss, degrades the ensign from his commission, as the cause not only of his losing Desdemona, but of "losing along with her all the enjoyments of life";—an act which ultimately leads his betrayer, who longs to be revenged upon him, to accuse him to the lieutenant as the murderer of Desdemona and the person "who had cut off his [the lieutenant's] leg, because he suspected him of adultery" with her. Then the Moor is arrested in Cyprus, brought to Venice, put to the torture on the ensign's testimony without confessing anything, and eventually condemned to perpetual exile, "in which," says the novelist,

[1] On the points noticed in the text see Hazlitt, 'Shakespeare's Library,' Pt. I. vol. ii., Introduction, 282 *et seqq.*; also Lloyd's 'Critical Essays on Shakespeare,' 1875, 457; and Hudson *ut supra*, i. 170 *seq.*

as he staggers weakly towards an ineffective climax, "he is afterwards killed, as he deserved to be, by his wife's relations." The ensign, it only remains to be added, is subsequently placed upon the rack for making a false accusation against one of his companions, and is so injured that he soon dies in great agony.

What a difference there is between this crude and clumsy ending and that great scene of pathos and passion, of mystery and mourning, on which the final curtain falls in the "Othello" of Shakespeare! No more perfect dramatic study of human character and passion in tragic circumstances is to be found elsewhere; not even in the very finest of the Greek plays, for there you have no such vivid and terrible illustration of the earnestness, purity, devotedness, and self-sacrifice of human love. Nothing can be more beautiful, more absolutely natural, more piercingly pathetic. And the spiritual import of the tragedy would have been utterly destroyed if Shakespeare, following the example of Cinthio, had made Iago vindicate the honour of the Moor and punish the reputed unchastity of Desdemona. The completeness and congruity and overpowering force of the drama depend on the central incident of its closing scene, so overhung with shades of horror and fateful dreariness, inasmuch as the murder of Desdemona *by Othello*, who, believing implicitly in the honesty of his ensign, and, as a consequence of that, in the forged evidence which he adduces against her, regards the deed as punitive rather than avenging—a severe but necessary exercise of justice—could alone prepare and provide for the unravelment of the hell-born conspiracy, which eventually entangles the good and the wicked alike in a labyrinthic maze of all-encompassing doom, and likewise for the complete unmasking of Iago and for the atoning death of the Moor himself;—events which at once excite in us lofty, earnest, strong emotions; satisfy the highest demands of tragedy, whose purpose it is to purge the passions by means of pity and terror; and illuminate the wild scene on which the last curtain drops with a brief and terrible splendour.

What makes Othello a tragic personage is the fact that the pure passion of his noble spirit is so perverted by the almost superhuman art of Iago that he ardently engages in acts of the meanest

and most malignant mendacity; his faith in human goodness is quickly transformed by the dragon's-breath of slander into an absolute belief in the dominion of grossness; and ultimately he is persuaded, by a whirlwind force of passion and of will, to destroy *with his own hands* the being in whom he has garnered up his heart, whom he cannot help still loving, as the remembrance of her past tenderness and touching grace is forced upon him in the crisis of his misery; the being on whom not only his peace and happiness depend, but his very life itself. And what constitutes the claim of Shakespeare to the fame of a great tragic poet in this creation is the elaborate minuteness and sinewy sternness with which he traces the gradual development of that terrible tragedy in the hero's soul which finally objectifies itself in the murder of Desdemona, and vividly reveals to us all the elements of which that terrible tumult of soul is composed—the indignation and regret, the solemn agony followed by incurable despair, and then the rapturous energy with which he rushes upon death, as he discovers that there now remains no sympathy which might assuage his miseries, no friend whose wisdom might teach him to endure them. The interest of the drama lies in the struggle of this gigantic and puissant soul with the fearful adversary Sin, which at length, in this last scene, overwhelms it and drags it down to the darkest depths of ruin. We wait with expectant awe for the doom which perhaps he has merited and which at least he cannot avoid. But we never cease to love him, "for," as Cassio says, "he was great of heart." We part with him in pity and in sorrow, as we could not have done had Cinthio's plan been adopted by the poet; and think less of his misdeeds and his frightful aberrations than of their terrible expiation. He has great and grievous faults, but the grandeur of his death almost redeems them. Such an improvement as this brings home to us the force and wisdom of Coleridge's dictum that Shakespeare's judgment is always equal to his genius.

The scaffolding or platform, all that relates to the formal construction of "Othello," is fixed, then, before Shakespeare puts his hand to it. Marlowe provides the metre, Cinthio the story; and wisdom and poetry live in the air he breathes;—in the thoughts,

the feelings, the sentiments and manners of the people. What remains for him to do, what he is supremely gifted for doing, is to purge the story of its dross and dust, of its crudities and inconsistencies; to replenish the pre-existent forms of Art with fresh vitality; to clothe the characters with the grace and strength of human nature; and, in a word, rear a beautiful and imperishable fabric on the basis and out of the materials already prepared. Cinthio, in fine, owns the quarry; but Shakespeare builds the poem, and, in Milton's words, pierces "dead things with inbreathed sense."

IV.

And this leads me to say that it is characteristic of our poet's method that all of his ideal dramas—I mean those which are not purely historical or chronicle plays—have a fundamental motive or definite point of interest, all the heterogeneous elements in the vision of life unfolded by the play contributing towards the predetermined effect of an ideal unity, and exemplifying some vital principle of ethics. If, as in "Othello," one character dominates the entire play, then it has what German critics, led by Gervinus and Ulrici, call a leading idea or fundamental motive, which is extended, enlarged, and modulated so as appropriately to suit the circumstances, the *personæ*, and the various contrasting phenomena of the piece. The same thing is to be found in the comedy of "Love's Labour's Lost," and in the Roman tragedy of "Julius Cæsar," which are direct-purpose plays; just as the English Histories of "Richard II." and "King John" are incidental-purpose ones. But when, as in "The Merchant of Venice," no single character dominates the whole thought and action of the piece, it has no fundamental motive beyond that which inspires and regulates every drama;—that, namely, of animating a story with salient portraiture of men and women studied from the life, or, in other words, exhibiting human emotion or human character in its real and living play.[1]

The ground-idea is carried through various forms of action, and

[1] See F. J. Furnivall, 'Leopold Shakespeare,' Introduction, cxvi.

by different groups of characters. These characters have assuredly separate and independent movements, yet they come at last into mutual contact; and, whether seconding or thwarting each other, so carry on the action to its highest point of complication that the culminant catastrophe reached in such tragedies as "Hamlet," "Romeo and Juliet," and "Othello," is found to be due not to any fortuitous combination of external circumstances, nor to a grim inexpiable Fate, which, enveloping and overshadowing the whole, is made the ruling principle of ancient drama; but to the moral weakness and perversity, the error and stupidity, the ordinary cunning or cleverness of the *dramatis personæ*. The tragic crisis is the inevitable outcome of the nature of the dramatic agents, who by physical contact and mental interaction mutually supply and exhibit each other's defects of character, and prepare the way for the great final event which invariably overwhelms in one common calamity the cruel and designing with the gentle and the just.

With Shakespeare, speaking generally, the thing of first importance is neither the subjective character of the acting personages nor the objective facts which form the framework of the drama; but "both organically combined together as equally important elements," as the case has been well put by Ulrici. In Shakespearian poetry Fact and Characterisation are of equal importance. The evolution of the plot and the development of the characters are co-ordinate and grounded on the deepest experiences of human life. The first conception of the characters necessarily determines the shape of the drama. But it is in the reconciliation of the apparent dissension that is going on amongst these, or the final reunion of the contraries, that the fundamental idea of the piece is to be discovered. Harmony is the chief criterion of truth; and dramatic completeness or immediate and all-pervading consistency is an essential attribute of true poetic genius. Therefore Shakespeare's first object is to tell a story that is dramatically complete; one, the inner truth of which will agree with our moral-social theories and feelings or philosophy of life, and accord with the actual experience of ordinary mortals.

CHAPTER VII.

CHARACTERISATION.

I.

The review attempted in the last chapter, brief and inadequate as it is, may answer the purpose of imparting some just notion of our poet's method of plot-construction and dramatic composition. To tell a story that is congruous, coherent, and complete—this, as has been shown, is the first purpose by which he is animated in the exercise of his craft. And in vivid concrete narrative he has no equal. But the chief attraction to Shakespeare is not in reality the story, which always occupies a comparatively subordinate place, but the psychological development and delineation of character. Indeed, the verisimilitude and dramatic completeness of such a story as that which forms the framework of "Othello," depend entirely on the judgment and skill with which the characters—out of whose inner being the whole action is evolved under the pressure of an innate organic law—are conceived, discriminated, and sustained.

Wherefore it is in his characterisation, not in his dramatic composition or in any absolute originality of design, that most critics rightly place his supreme excellence. He is pre-eminently the creator of character; "the man whom Nature's self has made to mock herself." And hence it has been reasonably enough conjectured by Delius and others that the reason which induces him to remodel the crude productions of older playwrights is

to prove the absorbing, quickening, creative efficacy of his own genius; and show how easy it is for him to put a vital spirit of grace and virtue into the gross, shapeless, unsouled forms of pre-existent drama. It has passed into a proverb that the new in art is always formed out of the old. And Shakespearian Drama is a signal example of the truth of the saying in its most enlarged sense. For, as has been seen, the poet, instead of exhausting his intellectual resources in devising original stories and sensational incidents, invariably makes up his plots out of such materials as are most familiar to his audience, trusts more to the freshness of his memory and the natural aids and inspirations of society than to the fertility and force of his invention, and yet never fails to produce a new and fairer whole.

Every mind has its own method. Jonson, whilst modelling his pieces upon the plan of his classic masters, still constructs his plots from his own materials. Marlowe, on the contrary, adheres closely, almost slavishly at times, to the lines of the fable on which his play is founded, albeit he raises and transfigures it by the strength and splendour of his own soaring passion. Shakespeare, again, borrows a story from some collection of popular tales simply as a foundation for his edifice; he takes a novel from Greene, a chronicle from Holinshed, a life from Plutarch, or steals the feeble and far-sought fable of some obscure and formless play, only that he may supply the precedent dramatic model with vigour and variety, with blood and breath. In either case he glorifies the style and matter, enlarges the incident and vivifies the thought, and transmutes the realities of life, so dimly shadowed forth in the original, into visions of the highest potency and beauty. The story of "Hamlet" or "Othello" is new-created by the poet for his own ends; or, in other words, chosen as a suitable medium for the bodying-forth of conceptions that are purely his own. In a certain sense the titular heroes of these tragedies may be said to give visible form to some of the most distinctive elements of his own many-sided nature; to impulses that stir so strongly within him that he is obliged, as it were, to suffer them to realise their energy within the sphere of his art. Hamlet comes out of his intellect, Othello out of his

passion. On both he has set his own unmistakable and ineffaceable seal.

There is every reason to believe that our poet in the composition of his dramas is principally actuated by a strong desire to show his superior skill in drawing living and impressive persons, in bringing them into the most wonderful and varied relations to one another, in setting them in motion by the most different motives, which yet co-operate towards an internal unity,—persons who are at once embodiments of general nature and of individual character, and therefore altogether unlike the brainless, meaningless, shambling figures that pass with lack-lustre eyes and tuneless tramp across the nascent stage of England; and through them to manifest his wide and perfect knowledge of the deepest and simplest attributes of our nature, or his unfailing directness and mastery of all that lies within the purely human province or mixed sphere of man's existence. Shakespeare with his self-sufficing genius cares little or nothing for novelty, which, like the "Sloth" of Horace, is a seductive siren to be shunned by the artist; a thing that lames or ties the hands of him who strains after it, and too often tempts him to minister to the imperfect tastes or the vitiated instincts of the groundling. He relies upon his varied experience, his sterling sincerity, his rare genuineness of vision, which makes the common uncommon, and excites in us indefinite suggestions of beauty. Impatient of counterfeits and things not alive, he aims at reproducing Nature in all its vital, perennial, and unwithering freshness and truth; and at crystallising, so to speak, external objects and circumstances in the medium of human feeling and human passion. Nothing less than the creation of Man and the translation of Nature into thought is his end and object. He feels, and desires to make his audience feel, the reality of life exceedingly. And therefore plots and stories are important to him only in so far as they furnish an outlet for his whole energy, and afford scope for the intelligible development of character under the moulding pressure of circumstance or commerce with other natures.

And this brings me to the second, or main, purpose which the poet has in view—namely, the evolution of the story by means of

characters who are at once purely human, strictly probable, wholly representative; characters whose humanity, in brief, is always so strongly and truly and fully realised that we are forced to sympathise with them profoundly. On each of the points indicated a more definite word may be admissible.

II.

We have high authority for believing that whatever is truly great in Christian Art is also restrictedly human.[1] And Shakespearian Drama furnishes the most signal example of the truth of the remark. The graphic and poetic arts of the Middle Ages embody for the most part the things of vision. Angelo breathes the very colour of his mystical mind into the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, and we have a picture representing the creation of a soul. Dante, brooding in exile on the sin and misery of the world and the vanity of human life, and longing for an "Urbs beata Ierusalem" with all the ardour of his nature, paints in words the eternity of happiness and torment, the gloomy circles of Hell and the crystalline spheres of Heaven. In a certain sense both artists are human in their delineations. They deal with things of vital human concernment. Yet they pass beyond the farthest verge of what man's mind may reach. They deal with facts; but they are essentially the facts of a vision—a knowledge "lengthened after life," like Clarence's wild dream. Such scenes, figures, and events are not within the scope of Shakespeare's perceptions. His mind is sanely realistic; and the basis of his art is *restrictedly* human. He concerns himself mainly, if not entirely, with the deeds and sufferings of living men, with the joys and sorrows, the failures and successes, of this *present* life. His art is a reflection or reproduction of the actual pleasures, pains, ambitions of men; and is altogether relative to these and dependent on them. His characters, in fine, are human beings like ourselves, actuated by various passions, and driven by a series of circumstances to definite actions.

[1] Ruskin.

And it is in this that Shakespeare towers above the greatest of his contemporaries. Contrast the characters of our poet with those of Jonson and Marlowe. In the dropsical dramas of the former there are indubitably many marvellously strong delineations. But as a rule Jonson's bold and muscular *personæ* are not impregnated with natural or profound human feeling. They have usually but one predominating quality or single propensity and mode of action; and are not easily, far less instantly, recognisable as beings of our own race. No doubt he transfers to the canvas of his invention the men and women he actually beholds in the flesh; but we now search in vain for any prototype of even his most realistic studies: whereas in the case of Shakespeare, who also finds in real intercourse with men the germ of fact from which he develops his characters—Pistol and Shallow and Dogberry may safely be regarded as portraits drawn from life, whilst the humorous and week-day types of rustic English society which abound in the plays may with equal safety be taken as his fellow-townsmen in Stratford or curiosities met with in the green lanes or sleepy hamlets of Warwickshire—we often find in the intercourse of daily life some person, male or female, oftener the latter, who might have supplied him with the nucleus of fact on which to base one or other of his most delightful creations. Jonson's characters are invariably abstract conceptions, mere names or portraits artificially constructed, in which there is nothing to analyse. As Hurd declares, they are "personified humours rather than natural beings"; general ideas, in other words, with transparent names such as Asper, Deliro, Subtil, Crites, Pecunia, Sordido. They hardly ever remain in the mind's eye as living images capable of speaking with the touching and sympathy-inspiring voice of human passion. Triumphs of art and genius they may be; yet they are essentially, and in contradistinction to those of Shakespeare, mere creatures of "the age," and not "for all time."

And very much the same may be said of the characters of Marlowe's dramas. Mr Swinburne aptly defines them as "the embodiments or the exponents of single qualities or simple forces." Because of this their reality is generally light and vague. They lack features and are not sharply enough characterised. They

are, in point of fact, so many animated moulds or lay figures, skilfully grouped for the delivery of lofty and appropriate sentiments, rather than individual characters filled with a life of poignant intensity; idealised passions rather than ideal conceptions of certain well-known types of humanity; pictures richly, broadly, powerfully executed, rather than dramatic personages studied with the poet's "eye on the object" and freely and vividly depicted, like those definite images of Shakespeare which, produced by a multiplicity of indescribable touches, seem to epitomise the whole multitudinous life of man, and even absorb into themselves, like the great Gothic cathedrals, something of the individuality of their creator.

In short, there is a realistic verisimilitude in Shakespeare's characters which is almost entirely wanting in those of his precursors and contemporaries. They are not shadowy abstract ideal images, like those modelled by the blundering hands of the early playwright; nor colossal personifications of human lusts and passions, like those of the deep-desiring Marlowe; nor vague, vamped-up theatrical figures, intended to exhibit the caprices and crotchets of contemporary life, like those of the didactic Jonson. You find in Shakespeare no patched-up pieces of painted puppetry, no stage-bethumping heroes of romance with prodigious lusts and impossible desires, no got-up figures of modes and manners mouthing malignant dialectics. You do not even find designs from nature, but nature itself in all its symmetry and roundness and completeness;—men stirred by the emotions and passions common to human nature in all ages; women of endless charm, who speak and act with the freedom, spontaneity, and directness of nature, and who from the beginning seem to have a true conception of the part they have to play in the poet's dramatic economy.

Shakespeare's characters bear human features strongly marked. Therefore there is no repetition amongst them. They perform actions which are manifestly evolved out of clearly defined passions. Therefore they never fail to interest and uplift us. And yet, whilst they are all furnished with the special features of the individual, they are still essentially typical. They may be best described, perhaps, as generic types rather than individuals—ex-

amples of passions exalted from the narrow sphere of the particular into the boundless domain of general truth; not products gathered out of a casual contact with a narrow, artificial, and transitory state of society, but ideals sought for and abstracted from universal life itself, and "animated by the primeval and unchanging forces of humanity." So that in every circumstance and situation, and through the spontaneous working of creative nature within them, so to speak, they give utterance to thoughts and sentiments which are in no sense topical or transitory, but of universal application and of undying importance to mankind. They move as in reality, as if they were veritable living men and women; with this difference, that whereas in the intercourse of ordinary existence we cannot recognise in those around us the separate elements of their composition or discover the true motive that underlies the action—for, in our poet's own words, "there's no art to find the mind's construction in the face"—these dramatic personages are mentally transparent, and disclose the inner workings of impulse and passion, so that Goethe has with much felicity compared them to clocks in crystal cases, where the intricate mechanism which sets them in motion is distinctly visible in all its parts.

One point, incidentally dropped in the foregoing paragraph, remains for consideration. In Shakespeare's dramas we have no one-sided or sectional view of human character. Unlike the greatest of his contemporaries, our poet seizes with the same sure grasp and even-handedness of presentation on what is essential in the two great divisions of humanity. If he is the most masterly delineator of all those strong and agitating emotions and passions which work with unrestrained intensity in the heart and mind of *man*, he is also in the great world of woman, as De Quincey finely says, "the sole authentic oracle of truth." His female characters are as originally conceived and as exquisitely delineated as his men. This is one of the chief things by which Shakespeare may be said to have differentiated his work in the sense of universality from that of all other dramatists of his time. With all their passionate imagination and knowledge of life and constructive talent, his senior contemporaries cannot fashion a noble and recognisably

human female figure. Their genius brings forth men-children only. If you cast a glance at the dramatic productions of Jonson, you look in vain among the many figures that crowd his stage for one touching and poetical female figure which could inspire you with genuine sympathy. He *never* drew a woman's character or portrayed the qualities which constitute her highest and subtlest charm. In this respect he ranks with Massinger, a playwright of second-rate importance. You find merely full-length studies of feminine manners, carefully constructed puppets in soulless bronze, or make-believe and ungenuine pieces of painted rhetoric;—at best mere mouthpieces of their maker's ringing declamation.

But what of Marlowe, with his "mighty line" and burning song? Has he not given us, it may be asked, Abigail in the "Jew of Malta," and Isabella in "Edward II."? Yes; but with all his fire and intensity and elevation of thought, with all his rapturous devotion to ideal beauty in all its forms, I fancy that sound criticism demands a similar verdict here. For these are portraits in which he has only half conceived and half expressed the character of woman. His conception of Dido undoubtedly displays more power. It is sketched with delicate and feeling touches. But the splendour and sweetness with which she is invested—especially in the scene in which she makes love to Æneas in the cave in which they seek shelter from the storm—are things borrowed from the poetry of the second and fourth Æneid. Whilst the phantasmal Helen,—she who is

> "Fairer than the evening air
> Clad in the beauty of a thousand stars,"—

is a mere abstraction of beauty that flits across the scene—a kind of wraith aflame with impassioned loveliness, summoned from Lethe to stimulate the hero's ennui-haunted soul as it flutters between repentance and distraction. She has no definite and recognisable personality. There is in short nothing genuine, nothing restrictedly human, in the female portraiture of these poets. Instead of living and breathing conceptions, they give us mere images of the brain. They show no delight in human

personality; and never dwell upon what is truest and best and purest in womanhood.

How different is it with Shakespeare! His conceptions of what woman is, and may be, remain unrivalled to this day. Think of the noble company assembled in that spacious and divine gallery of womanhood which his dramas open up to us; bland benignant beings such as Shakespeare alone of English writers has had a heart to conceive and a hand to delineate. Every portrait is a life-picture such as Correggio or Titian might have painted,—carefully studied, curiously detailed, executed with incomparable grace and truth of effect. Juliet, Desdemona, Ophelia, Rosalind, Isabella, Cordelia, Portia, Miranda, and our English Imogen, the crowning glory of his genius,—these, to mention but a few, are all characters gifted with a complex and independent vitality; characters of great sensibility or imaginative power or fervour of feeling. They are from the hand of a lover and an artist, who combines the keenest discernment of the possibilities of womanly worth and the deepest knowledge of the feminine heart with the happiest refinement of touch and the utmost faithfulness to ascertained fact.

They are realistic ideals, varied in character and in circumstance it is true; but all graceful, loveworthy, pre-eminently human-hearted. In each and all you discover the same essential charm of exquisite womanhood; the same beautifully conceived traits of great-hearted sweetness and devotion. Their humanity makes an irresistible appeal to the general heart and mind. Nowhere has the poet shown such calmly devoted wisdom, such breadth of sympathy, such gracious tenderness for individual character. Nowhere has he shown such righteousness of instinct and of insight. In actual life one might look in vain for such "grand" women as Corneille brings upon his stage. His heroines are almost men in their manners and modes of thought. But not so with the "pure womanly" creations of Shakespeare. These always bear a likeness to the fairest types of actual living humanity. They are not nebulous divinities or pallid projections from the poet's imagination; but simply and solely *women*, represented with peculiar distinctness and vividness, in their everyday

tempers and moods of mind. So far from being theatrical personages serviceable for the purposes of a passionate rhetoric, we instantly recognise them as our own veritable flesh-and-blood kindred—ideal beings subdued and exalted into bright human life; as clear to the memory as if we had actually seen them. We almost hear them breathe and see them walk. They become part of our life and daily thought—a speaking, breathing, operative power; their real strength lying not in personal force, but in moral excellence, in sensibility and delicacy and adhesion to the right. Nothing, in a word, can surpass the freshness and verisimilitude of these immortal studies of womanly character and womanly passion. What Shakespeare discovers to us in the favourite children of his imagination is abundantly confirmed by the daily experiences of ordinary life. The highest wonders of his art—beautiful faces, warm hearts, wise discourse, and heroic acts—are brought to our own door. The erotic weakness of an Ophelia, the waywardness and caprice of a Beatrice, the constancy and self-sacrifice of a Desdemona, the unapproachable chastity and rectitude of will of an Isabella, the pure zeal and redeeming ardour of a Cordelia, —are not these things, ineradicable traits of womanly nature, still to be discovered in deathless majesty beneath a modern gown? Who shall attempt to analyse the moral laws of the art-skill required and displayed in the creation of these flower-like figures which, animated by faithful life, are worthy of being looked upon for ever?[1]

[1] Knowing the limitations of the feminine nature, which is made up of fewer elements than that of man, Shakespeare wisely refrains from putting his Ophelias and Desdemonas in competition with his Hamlets and Othellos. A woman is never the central figure of a Shakespearian drama. She is created for the purpose not so much of acting herself as of being acted upon; and her character must be read and interpreted in the light which is shed upon it by the speech and action of her male associates. The insignificance, comparatively speaking, of Juliet and Ophelia and Desdemona would be painfully conspicuous but for the sustaining strength of Romeo and Hamlet and Othello, in whose actions the chief interest centres. Woman is never "conceived as a dramatic unity" by our poet. His great tragedies are not Desdemona or Cordelia or Volumnia; but Othello and Lear and Coriolanus. In brief, his male figures sustain the whole weight of the drama, and constitute the highest manifestations of his genius; and to the creation of these his imaginative faculty

III.

Now, combined and partly of kindred with this realistic faculty or power of producing purely human characters, is the natural ease and earnestness of the poet's temper, which guarantees their sanity and compactness, their proportion and dramatic probability. The lack of this supreme and saving quality is that which forms the glaring curse of the minor Elizabethan drama, the characters of which are mere automata;—painted images deceptively put in motion, without verisimilitude, without individual traits, without independent vitality. Even "The Picture" and "The Duke of

was undoubtedly stimulated by the proved capacity of such actors as Summer, Edward Alleyn, Laurence Fletcher, and Richard Burbage, who first played "Othello" at Whitehall on 1st November 1604. The histrionic talent of such men rendered possible the ideal representation of the great human passions, which is the aim and end of his art. He could rely upon securing actors capable of representing Iago, Hamlet, Falstaff, Richard III., Macbeth, and the Moor. But no women acted during the reigns of Elizabeth and James: the first occasion, it may not be out of place to mention, on which an English actress appeared on the stage in "Othello" was in 1663—forty-seven years after our poet's death; so that the female parts had to be intrusted to boy-actors, who, although carefully trained, must have done but scant justice to the parts they played. One can imagine with what reluctance Shakespeare must have committed the *rôle* of Desdemona to a boy. Surely at times what was intended to excite admiration must have failed to touch the audience, and what should have been pathetic must have become something very much akin to farce. This fact has always impressed me with the idea that whilst Shakespeare is the greatest stage-poet the world has seen, he yet writes as much for the closet as for the stage;—nay, that he addresses himself in reality much less to an audience than to a circle of readers. It may at least be fairly enough conjectured that he preferred the literary form to the stage-setting of his dramas, albeit he seems to have been serenely indifferent as to the correction, preservation, and publication of these. Any one who reads his plays with care will at once perceive how at times the theatre passes altogether from his mind, as if the stage were too narrow a sphere for the adequate expression of his world-embracing thoughts. Although a master of theatrical effect, Shakespeare, as has been said, "is often found working away from it rather than toward it, and at a meaning and beauty beyond the limits of stage expression." (See Franklin Leifchild, on "Hamlet: A New Reading," in 'Contemporary Review' for January 1883.) This view strictly harmonises with that of Charles Lamb, who held by the opinion that "King Lear" should be read, not acted—a remark which applies with almost equal force to some other plays.

Milan" of Massinger, and "The Broken Heart" of Ford, are remarkable for improbability, unnaturalness, and "topsy-turviness of incident." But Shakespeare's characters bear no resemblance to the violently moved marionettes of the minor drama as represented by Marston and Tourneur. They are organised in him as in nature, from the heart outwards; and are developed with due regard to likelihood and order, to balanced gravitation of parts and to unity of design, of interest and impression. Disregard of probability is not one of our poet's faults. Nor is the charge of utterly neglecting congruity and proportion one which can be fairly brought against him, though it is one to which Marlowe and Webster and Ford are peculiarly exposed. His dramatic personages are accurate, restrictedly human, sharp and solid as reality. And, with the single exception of those graceless and charmless anthropolites, Regan and Goneril, in "King Lear," which, as we have seen, is a play whose foundation is unnatural and irrational, whose interest depends on the assumption of a gross improbability, they think and speak and act in strict accordance with the ordinary laws of life, and work together harmoniously toward a given end. They are emphatically nature copied and embellished: in no sense exceptions to the general experience of mankind; but beings studied and abstracted from actual life, over whom he has simply thrown the shining veil of the ideal with the view of tempering the naked austerity of positive concrete fact and preventing them from being vulgarised by any prejudices of time and place. For, as we shall see presently, Shakespeare's *dramatis personæ* are typical and representative; and, unlike the creations of Jonson, completely defecated of all mixture of contemporaneousness. Their vitality is the vitality not of any particular blood or tongue or epoch, but of human nature. They are not so much Greeks and Romans and Britons as fluid and soul-guided men and women, whom we at once recognise as coevals not only of each other but of every one who will sympathetically study them. The genius of nature, in short, is paramount in these creations; and the most markworthy passages of pathos and of passion that are to be found in "Othello" and "Hamlet" and "Macbeth" may with perfect propriety be said to

be "in the very dialect of the present year"—as fresh and potent to-day as if they had but just left the hand of the poet.

It is in this union of real and ideal that the felicity of Shakespeare's art-faculty essentially consists. He perceives first, and then abstracts. He penetrates nature, and then subordinates it for the purposes of expression. He lays hold of a fact and causes the light of higher laws than its own to shine through it. He takes the hero and the maiden and animates them with his own thoughts, which outlast all vicissitudes of time and taste. For his moral philosophy, his human ideal, his poetic comprehension of history are things which we can neither impeach nor overturn. He is a poet who always seems peculiarly to belong to the present. And it is characteristic of his artistic method that when, as so often happens, he treats of events and persons not specifically historical, or, in other words, draws his facts, incidents, and characters from the wide and wonderful realms of his own imagination, his work continues essentially historical in spirit and in grain. He adopts the *laws*, as the case has been well put, if he rejects the *matter* of history; "so that we have pure creations formed upon the principles, and in the order and manner, of historical dramas."[1] Legend and history, with all their improbabilities and exaggerations, commonly form, as we have seen, the basis of the immortality of his characters. But in order to gratify his love of the type in human portraiture he oftentimes sacrifices these—as notably in "Othello"—albeit he never falsifies the facts of the novel or chronicle from which his plot is derived, or sacrifices probability to stage effect.

Shakespeare's dramas, as I have indicated, stand "exempt from the wrongs of time," and treat of things which underlie and outlast the peculiar manners and customs of any particular age. The several characters, too, stand out round and clear in themselves; and the interest which we feel in them does not depend on any accidents of time and place. Whether historically true or not, they exhibit the extraordinary exactness of the poet's observation and the abundance of his knowledge of human life. As organised beings endowed with a complex and independent

[1] Hudson *ut supra*, i. 151.

vitality, they directly furnish instruction and inspiration in the truth of things. We therefore think little or nothing of race, epoch, and surroundings—the three primordial forces which contribute to the formation of character. We simply inquire as to the humanity and probability of the *personæ;* and on these points, even after the most cursory examination of the plays, it is not difficult to pronounce an opinion. In respect of characterisation, indeed, the wonderful results attained by Shakespeare amply justify the great dictum of Plato, that "poetry comes nearer to vital truth than history." In illustration of this let me give a single example.

The brave and magnanimous Mark Antony—for with all his aptitudes for vice and proneness to gigantic profligacy he is bold and strong, and easily roused to generous deeds of noble daring—is given to our poet by history. All the heroism and voluptuousness and ingrained worldliness of his unbalanced nature, all the salient characteristics of his irregular mind, are unfolded and commented upon in Cicero's 'Letters and Philippics,' in Appian, and in Plutarch, the account of the latter being that to which Shakespeare most closely adheres. The great Roman soldier is no doubt transfigured by the vivid and vigorous touch of the poet. But there is no violation of historic truth in the delineation. The Antony of the tragedy is recognisably the veritable Antony of history; a literal transcript from fact. Shakespeare has simply embodied a pre-existing conception, and religiously preserved the historical features of the hero's character as these are outlined in the narrative of Plutarch. But the regal and dazzling Cleopatra—so gracefully pliant in body, so soft of speech, so languorous in look, so criminal in passion and inscrutable in cunning, so daringly brilliant and divinely wicked (according to a certain strain of criticism Shakespeare's masterpiece in female characterisation)—is almost entirely the product and property of his own inventive genius. Yet the impetuous Eastern enchantress, the sorcerous yet angelic "serpent of old Nile" who, with her mad passion and her poor frivolity, lives entirely in an ideal region above and beyond the reach of any moral code, and exempt from all law except that of her own will, and therefore belongs to

the most ideal and imaginative class of subjects, holds and impresses us, more truly even than the great Roman triumvir himself, who is held in "the whirlwind of her devices and caprices," with the most vivid sense of reality. Antony is left in close relation to the old history; Cleopatra belongs wholly and intimately to the poet. As a type of actual womanhood, however, Juliet and Cordelia and Desdemona do not appear more intensely real than she.

IV.

It is further to be noted that Shakespeare's characters are usually depicted with such stubborn realism, and their distinguishing traits are brought out with such truth and precision, that at first sight they appear to be simply natural. But whenever we compare them with our own flesh-and-blood acquaintances, the impression of the senses is invariably replaced by an ideal conception which discloses a wider and more abiding form of existence, and appeals directly to the senses of imagination. Their typical greatness or ideal character, even when they are of a subordinate or doubtful nature, immediately comes into view—a fact which bears out the well-known argument of Coleridge that our poet's method of projecting character is to pass every conception through the medium of his meditative intelligence, and by so doing render it typical.

Of course, it seems very easy to understand Desdemona, with her rashness of impulse and action, her violent self-abandonment to passion, her invincibility of womanly compassion and divine persistence of more than Christian forgiveness; or Ophelia, with her crystal simplicity of life and language, her wasting heartbreak, her gentle lunacy; or Isabella, with her heroic chastity and saintly strength and fresh straightforwardness of feeling; or Imogen, with her pure ardour, her vivacity of fancy, her artless and invulnerable love, her victorious truth and clearness of understanding. These blissful creatures—

> "Pardon me, gods!
> I'd change my sex to be companion with them"—

appear quite simple conceptions. And yet we never entirely comprehend them. We study them for years only to discover that, like the simplest real human being, they are inexhaustibly full of meaning. In the pure and unshored abysses of their nature there is an ideal somewhat which will not yield altogether to any special act of reflection, a nameless and unseizable quality that baffles the eye and puzzles the brain whilst it gives stateliness and beauty to the life that it animates.

Men may assimilate Marlowe and Massinger and Milton, and separate the whole body of their work by a gradual breaking into parts. But Shakespeare seems incapable of the necessary disintegration or dismemberment. His finest delineations, in which so many diverse, even opposite, qualities meet and mingle, scarcely admit of being thoroughly analysed by the simple critical method of addition or subtraction. No generalities, no formal conclusions, can adequately set them off. His men and women are always in a fluid or formative state, and, strictly speaking, do not discover a fixed essence of character or an unaltered air and attitude. When we attempt to grasp any one thing as specially characteristic of them, the best part always seems to escape between the fingers. There is a continual composition and decomposition of elements, so that subtle and complex characters like Iago and Hamlet and Cleopatra, who, subject to all the fluctuations of accident or caprice, are for ever creating a fresh series of impressions which seems at first sight irreconcilable with the preceding series, although ultimately it is brought into vital relation with all that has gone before, can scarcely be digested into the precise forms of logical statement. The transitions from one mood to another are so frequent and so rapid, the modifications of passion by other feelings to which the individual is liable, are so minute and so immediate that, until the experiment is tried, as Hazlitt observes, "we do not know the result, the turn which the character will take in its new circumstances." Shakespeare's characters are very human and very sharply drawn, and appear to be simple copies from originals actually beheld in the flesh; yet, even when naturally common in type, and deficient in the graces and refinements of life, like

Autolycus, Grumio, Dogberry, and Verges, they are always embellished and illuminated and raised by his idealising spirit into a far higher light than that which usually surrounds the common life of vulgar accident.

Even so realistic a delineation as Mrs Quickly, the naughty hostess of Eastcheap, or the foolish and babbling Nurse in "Romeo and Juliet," whom Hartley Coleridge thinks is "not a very discreet guardianess for a beauty in her teens," or Peter or the poor Apothecary in the same play, or the ribald Porter in "Macbeth," or the human-hearted Fool in "Lear," or the Courtesan or the Serving-Woman in "Othello," is found, when compared with the unrelieved reality of human nature as we know it, to have received an ideal heightening of the rarest quality. There is a certain homely ideality or pathetic simplicity of interest about them which keeps them from being merely transcripts of sixteenth-century common life, and precludes us from accepting them as less than universal forms shaped out of the primal elements of nature. Shakespeare's copies from experience are never mere copies. They are always touched and softened by ideal tints. Wherever there is life in his dramas, even though it be bestial or obscure or lunatic life, there is a strange or simple beauty. And although silk purses cannot be made out of sows' ears, he has at least shown us that real heroines —as, for instance, in the case of Emilia in the terminal passages of "Othello"—can be made out of simple servant-maids and frivolous and free-fancying waiting-women.

Literal truth, it has been said, is essential untruth. And therefore literal truth, what one may call the concrete picturesque, is, after all, not that which our poet strives most strenuously to realise. He rather aims at discovering the ideal, or, in plainer speech, that part of the real which is the most essential or dominant as distinguished from the accidental or subordinate,—the permanent characteristics and universal elements of human nature as distinguished from the mutable or local elements which reveal the fashion of the hour or the passing features of an age. Psychologic, not historic truth, is his ultimate aim; and it is from the imaginative, not from the literal point of view, that his

work is to be approached. By adopting this method we are enabled to appreciate that Shakespearian largeness which makes Othello, Lear, Hamlet, and Iago, Falstaff, and Jacques members of the same vast family. With true perception and infallible artistic judgment Shakespeare's characters are all more or less idealised. But this, as I have just indicated, is done in such a way as to enhance and heighten rather than diminish and lower their verisimilitude and probability. It may be safely asserted, indeed, that if they are not historically true they *might* be.

The idealising of his dramatic personages is always undertaken firmly yet temperately, not in substitution but in furtherance of truth; always accomplished without any disturbance of balance or unity or shapeliness, for the form and the ideal exist in absolute and inseparable identity. His characters, in brief, are purified and potentiated and freed, by ideal treatment, from everything that is not individual in them. In the fervour of invention the poet, with all his force and elasticity of soul, remains calm and self-possessed. Though habitually possessed by his imagination, moderation and composure are seldom if ever quite lost. If he has the power of creating, he has also the power of keeping his creation in order. He is master over himself and his materials even when these by their nature are apt to offend our taste. He is always capable of presenting effectively and without doing violence to our moral sensibilities the most repulsive qualities, as in "Antony and Cleopatra" or "Troilus and Cressida"; of reconciling the most apparent contradictions of human thought and action, as in "Hamlet"; of holding together with a strong hand the various elements of a complex problem of casuistry or of conduct, as in "Othello" or "Macbeth." He certainly mingles fancy with truth, and often confuses the boundaries of fact and fable with an inseparable mingling of living and changing forms which seem to arrange themselves by instinctive development, and, without any outward compulsion, display and group themselves before our eyes. But not maliciously for falsehood's sake, but seriously for the sake of impassioned truth; not with the view of mocking the purblind understanding of the reader or spectator, but with the view rather of enlarging the meaning of the histrionic exhibi-

tion, or increasing the felicity of a particular delineation; or, in a word, of producing and completing his work in its ideal integrity.

Strictly speaking, there is no hollowness or insolidity, no overfulness of fancy or root of falsehood discoverable in his creations; "the ideal is so equally diffused, and so perfectly interfused with the real, as not to disturb the natural balance and harmony of things;" and such is the nervous delicacy and unifying power of his unfettered and colour-giving imagination that what is characteristic of the proper individuality of the particular character delineated is unfolded into greater clearness and purity by the ideal heightening which it receives, and which has for its primary purposes the purging of our vision, the widening of our horizons, the exhibition of the broader and more general aspects of Humanity. To know another man, says Hamlet, is to know one's self. That is to say, the self-conscious heart becomes the true interpreter of life. And in this, perhaps, lies the explanation of the whole matter. Shakespeare's idealism, enriched and sobered through concrete human experience, discerns a new world beneath life's everyday appearances, and intuitively discovers what man must be at all times and in all circumstances. Reflecting upon nature and generalising the various facts or suggestions of truth and beauty which he has received from it, he becomes aware of something which can never reach us through the gateways of sense or be thoroughly grasped and fully understood by the logical understanding, but which poetry can bring nearer to man's sensuous or spiritual perceptions. And his rapidity and vivacity of apprehension, his creative untaught felicity in epithet and language, are such that he gives a human depth and rich intensity to his characters not to be found in those of other poets, and throws upon material things which have been conscientiously and lovingly observed in nature that light of reason which "is as the lamp of God wherewith He searcheth the inwardness of all secrets." He lays siege to nature's secrets, enters hitherto unexplored provinces of humanity, rises into a clearer region where he sees the facts of life with unimpeded vision, and unfolds into clearness the very soul of man "made magically perfect." By Shakespeare's idealism is simply meant, then, the power of seeing

the right facts in their essence and giving them due prominence, and of *unseeing* the false ones;—those fallacies and false appearances, that is, which interpose their delusions when we are least aware, and seem to be inseparable from our nature and our condition of life. His art is simply nature ideally reproduced through the imagination in all its simplicity and variety, in all its order and truth, with the view of strengthening us against all those snares and disqualifications which unconsciously haunt and waylay and hamper the strongest as well as the weakest minds, and of vivifying our conception of the great and fundamental facts of actual life as these affect the human senses and the human soul.

V.

In illustration of the foregoing take an example in which the ideal element is most prominent and intense. Over against the dark, complex, fickle, voluptuous, and self-conscious Cleopatra, whose Greek nature, heated by the scorching suns of Egypt, is literally aflame with lawless and overwhelming passion, let me set the clear, simple, pure, placid, and self-mistrustful Miranda, whose plastic nature, breathing the fresh sea-air of the enchanted island, remains for ever unweakened by the stress and strife of life, and unvisited by "the contagion of the world's slow stain." In the one case the poet idealises *into*, in the other he idealises *out* of the dirt. In Cleopatra we see all the follies of love—its entanglements, its mischiefs, its foulness. In Miranda we discover the passion of love chastened, purified, refined. The two characters, in their association with Antony and Ferdinand respectively, serve to show us the exalting and ennobling, and the corrupting and debasing, sides of the relations between the sexes. In his absorbing love of the type in human portraiture Shakespeare in his treatment of woman simply does what Ruskin tells us Turner did with his sepia drawing of *Isis*. He begins, that is, with the extreme light in the sky, and paints for us the pure unclouded heaven of a Miranda's serene and steady soul. And then he gradually shades down from this till in the queenly harlot Cleopatra he is forced to

represent nature as one mass of rich, voluptuous, velvety blackness, throbbing riotously with the pulses and powers of unbridled passion.

Now Shakespeare does not depart from truth in these opposite delineations. He simply intensifies and concentrates it. The lower or illicit love, when thus idealised, expands into every "lust of the eye, and pride of life." The higher or lawful love, when thus idealised, develops into all those graces and virtues which are the proper and distinctive constituents of the Christian Ideal. The poet sharply draws the distinction between them. The beauty of the one is the pure and perfect beauty of human love religionised; freed from appetite and animated by a personal sense of rightness. The beauty of the other is the vicious and imperious beauty of human love entirely dereligionised;—a beauty entwined with the serpent and inflamed by unhallowed desire. And if, doubting the probability of such life and action as are represented by such strumpet-goddesses as Cleopatra and Cressida—those bad angels of the love of sense, whose concupiscent thoughts

"Are like unbridled children, grown
Too headstrong for their mother"—

or by such irredeemable villains as Edmund and Iago—those merciless masters of wit and wickedness, whom some men misdeem unnatural and beyond the pale of probability because their thoroughpaced villany is passionless or motiveless—you say that the most outstanding figures in Shakespearian drama are the vicious and the venal, and the most carefully painted the degenerate and depraved, I would ask you to remember that these dark but definite pictures of ideal life are produced according to the laws of nature, as Rubens and Titian and Rembrandt understood and interpreted them in their imperishable masterpieces, where you will find that the shadows always contain more vigorous colours than the lights to which they *are* shadows.[1] And as all shadows in nature are true contrasts to their lights—the denser the shadow, the fuller the light—so the darkening of the Iagos and Cressidas and Cleopatras, the most living pictures that the

[1] See Ruskin, 'Oxford Lectures on Art,' 177.

pencil of our poet ever drew, only tends to reveal more intensely and by force of contrast the noble virtues and sweet and solid qualities of those who are ruined by their magic or hopelessly involved in the cruel coils of their inscrutable cunning. They are given, in short, as shadows to bring the fairer side of human nature into a fuller light.

Shakespeare, observe, casts no false halo around treachery or sensuality or wantonness; and never seeks to suborn our feelings by subtle and enticing indecencies like the Restoration poets or the dramatists of Queen Anne's reign. But you can have no standard of the true unless aberrations from it are possible. And you can have no standard of the beautiful unless a declension from the line of beauty and goodness is possible. Nay, more, without the disturbing elements of misadventure and error and pollution, that moral purification by means of pity and terror which it is the primary object of dramatic art to bring about, would be impossible of accomplishment. These self-evident propositions the poet keeps in view, therefore, in all his imitation and idealisation of human nature. The perilous brilliancy and concupiscence of the capricious and crafty Oriental Cleopatra, who conquers by wit and wickedness, by coquetry, and the shameless splendour of "lascivious grace," are as natural and as probable as the pure and pious passion of that guileless child of wonder, Miranda, who conquers simply by purity and submission. Of both characters it may perhaps be said that the Ideal could hardly be pushed further beyond Nature. And yet in both cases, by pure felicity of art faculty, the ideal is clothed with all the life and truth of nature. And although Iago may be morally horrible and Desdemona stainlessly pure, Shakespeare, as Keats once pointed out, has as much delight in creating the one as he has in creating the other. And rightly so. For each embodies and represents a truth deserving and demanding treatment in a drama which professes impartially to hold "the mirror up to nature, to show virtue her own feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure." Such things are essential to tragedy. Nay, more, they are the bases of *all* life-reflecting works of art.

VI.

Shakespeare, it is manifest, cannot entirely shake off the fetters which fasten him to his epoch. He waits for the gifts of his time, and does not attempt to forerun the limitations of his day. In a sense his most splendid pictures offer to the world no more than an image of his own age or of his own heart. The realistic element is thus so great and so evident, that one is very apt to overlook the existence or underestimate the effect of that ideal element by means of which the men and women of the London of Elizabeth are transfigured and glorified into the kings and queens and captains and high-born maidens of his immortal dramas. Even Schiller found it difficult to penetrate the mass of real matter in Shakespeare's work, and grasp the spirit of the poet. It is said that at first he perceived nothing but realism in his plays, and felt repelled by their massive concentration and harsh truth. But gradually he became more and more impressed by his natural ideality, his restless and high-reaching inventiveness which, according to the final judgment of the great German, brought him into close contact and affinity with the master-spirits of ancient art.

And probably this is by no means a unique experience. As a rule, what first strikes us all is the stern objectivity of Shakespearian Drama; or, in other words, the wonderfully real truth of the poet who does not, Hamlet-like, belittle the world, or withdraw from the wholesome activities of ordinary men to indulge in vague or vapid dreams. He does not reject his surroundings, but rather clings tenaciously to them; and, mixing in the busy hum of men, finds in the realities of humble life a poetry and a beauty which vitalise his energy and give a true inspiration to all his work. A simple strain of human interest is always interwoven with the delight derived from those delicious awakenings of the higher powers which such a drama as "Hamlet" discovers to us. And thus we are long in discerning or even suspecting the presence of the ideal; longer still in determining and appreciating this vital interrelation, or equal balance of real

and ideal elements, by which the probability of the *personæ* is secured and maintained, and which such a master of poetic art as Goethe speaks of as one of the most noteworthy virtues of the dramatic poetry of the Elizabethan age.

Shakespeare, as we have seen, deals with the essentials of life, as all true thinkers do. He approaches and accepts the real world as it is, and for what it is. But at the same time he penetrates it with flashes of deep-probing wisdom and with sudden spiritual fire. His mode of life is not adverse to inwardness. And his ultimate purpose is to liberate rather than create; to rearrange and illuminate that matter of observed life with which his memory is charged; and to give freedom and consciousness to what has potentially existed in embryo from the beginning of time. Hence his characters are pervaded and animated and harmonised by the spirit of life which flows from the centre of nature, and reveal thoughts and feelings which are common to all mankind. But he has an ear for the finer harmonies of the inner life, and pursues and seizes with convincing mastery the rarest and subtlest movements of impassioned feeling. He exalts and vivifies human thought and human passion. So that in the very act of exhibiting the workings of our common nature, his characters are raised by his large and expansive imagination to a height far above their own uninspired personality. Whilst adhering closely to the little actualities of ordinary existence, he clothes them in the more enduring forms of a larger and more exalted life not wholly irreconcilable with the conditions of "such beings as we are, in such a world as the present."

VII.

You never find Shakespeare idealising away the facts of life like the King of Navarre and his young lords in "Love's Labour's Lost." And therefore, when I speak of the domestic tragedy of "Othello" as more realistic, more compressed, more definite, and of the dream-and-thought tragedy of "Hamlet" as more ideal, more complex, more alive with breeding imagery, it is not meant that the one is true to the facts of life and the other untrue. It

is rather meant that in the one the facts necessary to its formation and the circumstances in which the interest chiefly centres are taken more in the gross, and in the other there is a careful selection of those facts that are representative of the highest and the lowest things in human nature. "Othello" is remarkable for the strangeness and splendour of its romantic element, for its emotional tendencies, its conflict of feeling, its broad and unmistakable ethical features, its keen and searching judgments on the passions, duties, and home-instincts of humanity. The sense of the play is simple and transparent. The story is not complicated, and can easily be followed in its whole course. The action hinges on one mighty and familiar passion, that enthrals the senses and imagination, and excites the deepest depths of the hearer's soul. But "Hamlet" is the play in which the poet deals with the profoundest mysteries of being, and soars to the highest altitudes of human thought as well as human passion; in which he reveals not only his own view of the world and life, but expresses the essential spirit of his own age. It is pre-eminently a psychological study: a history of a human mind of exceptional force and lustre; a strange and subtle work which admits and requires some closer than common scrutiny. The sense of the play is intrinsically obscure, perplexing, enigmatic because of the excessive reflective tendency or native bias towards introspection which distinguishes its central figure. The interest of the story, as Hazlitt has noticed, is more remote and reflex. And the action turns upon the circumstance of the supernatural being brought into immediate contact with the real in order to bring suddenly to light a secret crime, and so to heighten the conflict between the hero's "longing for free and deliberate action, and the constraining circumstances in which he is placed."[1]

In "Othello," with its wealth of various life, we receive a sane and sympathetic interpretation of the common concerns of human life—a vivid and affecting revelation of the pitiable despair and agonies of love, of deceptions and disasters only too often verified in the experience of men. In "Hamlet," with its wider vision and more purely ideal conception of existence, we get discoveries

[1] Ulrici, 'Shakespeare's Dramatic Art,' 225.

and sphinx-like deliverances of a soul of rarer and more intense spiritual experience; one endowed with nobler motives and with larger ideas, and quickened and exalted into higher life by the pressure of chaotic social forces and the supernatural revelation of that tremendous crime which has at once profaned the sacredness of human life and the sanctity of human love. But the one quite as much as the other is not simply a concrete realistic study of special affliction, but the ideal, interior, or fundamental drama of the soul and the world. Hamlet is not a mere metaphysical entity, but a man of flesh and blood; a tender-conscienced and high-hearted being quite as real to our perceptions as the noble and heroic Othello himself. Both are characters drawn on a larger scale than ourselves perhaps; but neither the one nor the other is a hero of romance, but a true man perfectly delineated. Nature and probability are not violated by these picturesque personalities. When they speak it seems as if thoughts and feelings long pent up in us had found their most natural and immediate utterance. Both reflect with almost equal vividness the movement of life in its animation of joy and pain. And both exemplify the fact, which at first seems paradoxical, that the more Shakespeare idealises his characters the more they gain in sharpness of definition and convincingly intense reality; the more natural and probable do they become.

Of course their probability will be most readily discovered by those who, like Hamlet, have experienced the sharp pains of consciousness, or stumbled over the great enigmas of the world, or struggled ineffectually to conform to an internal personal standard of right; and by those again who, like Othello, have been oppressed by a feeling of depreciation, of wounded honour and deceived confidence, and who have come to regard the fleckless purity of woman's love as a thing of incalculably greater value than its passionate intensity or even its continuance. But the sense, efficacy, and probability of these delineations cannot fail to impress all persons of ordinary observation and intelligence who have not experienced such sorrow and wrong and loss. In their admirable generality of appeal resides their merit. The opinions and sentiments to which they give utterance, though

they are true, forcible, and illustrated and reinforced with images of singular beauty and sufficiently characteristic of their individual nature and the special circumstances in which they are placed, are not in reality peculiar either to Hamlet or Othello, or to any man or class or epoch, but are sentiments and opinions which belong to Humanity in general, and would fall naturally from the lips of any noble and considerate person similarly situated, and endowed with intelligence equal to their own.

Shakespeare, in short, arrives at his most artistic results, and produces his most original and enduring figures when he gives an intense ideal heightening to the merely actual, or, in other words, paints his characters from the ideal side. One of the most signal examples of success in this regard is his mighty delineation of the impregnable and invulnerable demi-devil Iago, whose fine intelligence, added to his remorseless villany and all-destroying supremacy of evil, raises him to an almost preternatural height of imperious and dauntless devilhood, and yet keeps him on the plane of fact, a veritable creature of flesh and blood as real to our perceptions and appreciations as Pietro Aretino or Cesare Borgia, men of undoubted genius, yet the typical ruffians of an age which brought ruffianism to a kind of ideal perfection. And it is worthy of remark that there is in this passionless and malignant being a power of self-command, a lithe and serpentine energy, an intellectual superiority that enables him to use all men as his tools, an innate and invincible aversion to good in itself, a steady consistency in evil-doing, and an enthusiastic self-contentment with his "divinity of hell," which somehow compel our admiration in spite of ourselves. The possibility, nay, the probability, of such a form of human nature is made good, too, by the history of that absolute villain, Richard III., who "had in reality committed more unnatural deeds than Iago in poetry."[1] Indeed, no historical portrait that we possess will take precedence—as a mere portrait—of Shakespeare's brilliant study of the Ancient. It is a perfect picture, as some one observes, of abstract treachery transformed into a concrete form.

[1] Gervinus, 'Commentaries,' 526 and 863, 864.

VIII.

As an essential mark of dramatic probability, it may further be noted that Shakespeare's characters cohere with, and, according to the proper conditions of their development, sustain the action of the story, so that, in spite of his multifarious underplots and minor groups, there is nothing arbitrary or mechanical or incongruous in the evolution of the drama. The abstract meditations of Hamlet are certainly interspersed with the pedantic platitudes of Polonius; and the solemnity of poor Ophelia's burial is rudely broken by the terrible buffoonery and grim grotesqueness of the gravediggers. Lear's ear-cleaving ravings against fate are hurled out in the midst of the inexhaustible wit of the ingenious and sympathetic Fool who, condemned to burlesque and ignominy by the niggard force of circumstance, continually breaks out into freaks of playfulness and jets of comic fancy, "with pathos delicately edged," and bravely labours to outjest his master's "heart-struck injuries"; and the tempest and storm of Othello's agony give place to the loud-sounding mirth and the pothouse songs of his dissolute soldiery; whilst the merciless murder of the meek-eyed Duncan is followed by the gross and ribald "devil-porter" soliloquy of the droll and drunken domestic of Macbeth.

In Shakespearian drama the smile is thus seen to be in constant competition with the tear. Singing continually takes the place of screaming and every other species of shrill melodramatic intensity. This is especially true of the great Gothic tragedy of "King Lear," where the pathetic-humorous Fool represents the dark and tearful side of music, and gives tuneful expression to the regrets and sighs, the unsatisfied thoughts and melancholy forebodings of human nature that, with the restlessness of despair, would oftentimes fain be sung in wild hymns and wailing threnodies by vengeful mourners amid deeds of darkness and the dismal scenery of man's transgressions. Everywhere there is song and jubilation—amid the storms of "Lear" and the heavy-

headed revels of "Othello," and the heartbreak and anguish of Ophelia in "Hamlet." In the very sternest tragedy much of the moral earnestness is arrayed in fantastic motley, much of the deep-probing and illuminating wisdom of the poet is with happy audacity communicated by the lips of a fool, and many of the most significant acts performed by him; as notably in the sublime and wonderful tragedy of "Antony and Cleopatra," where, by a strange but deliberate irony it is the Clown who brings liberty to the voluptuous enchantress whose "desolation does begin to make a better life," and who carries to her the basket in which lies concealed "the pretty worm of Nilus that kills and pains not," whose "biting is immortal."

Now this admixture of comedy with tragedy, or this Petronian mingling of the grim and ghastly with the fair and familiar, or the ludicrous and ironical with the stately and impassioned, does not in the least militate against the dramatic probability of Shakespeare's work. These comic interludes and musical diversions and grand ironies do not in the least interfere with, or diminish the effect of, the severer elements and the graver aspects of his art. For, as Coleridge rightly remarks, he never introduces these things into his serious drama unless when they may "react on the tragedy by harmonious contrast." And any one experienced in life will at once see that the Fool and Edgar are not out of place in "Lear," but that on the contrary they are in vital intercourse with the essential character and passion of the play, and, like Roderigo in "Othello," bring the highest into sympathy with the lowest intellects by means of their cheveril wit or flippant inanities; and that the solemnity and passion of "Hamlet" and "Macbeth" do not necessarily provoke in the spectator a revulsion of feeling against the ribald and whimsical gravediggers and the bibulous and drolly moralising Porter. Any one of average sense will laugh with open heart at these grotesque beings, and have no reluctance or misgiving or remorse in accepting and enjoying sallies which, although they seem at first sight to be somewhat out of place, yet on reflection give us a new sense of the variety and capacity of nature. For humour and pathos are the inseparable warp and woof of existence. With every

tragedy in actual life are intermixed many circumstances and events which are essentially humorous; with every comedy there are also intermixed many serious passions. History and experience fail to furnish us with examples of pure farce like the skimble-skamble "Comedy of Errors," or of pure tragedy like that great work of human art the "Agamemnon." "The web of our life is a mingled yarn, good and ill together," says our poet; an amalgamation of comic and tragic elements: a thing which is neither comedy, nor tragedy, nor farce, although it largely partakes of the characteristics of all three. In short, probability is not violated in any of the above-mentioned delineations, albeit there is undoubtedly discoverable in each and in all a certain vein of Aristophanic or Rabelaisean exaggeration which occasionally prolongs the treatment beyond the limits of patient attention. But, speaking broadly, we have in all a faithful if highly idealised representation of nature. Pity and humour and terror meet daily and interweave their spells; and tragedy only grows more tragic and more real, when, by no *forced* artistic methods, but naturally, contrary emotions are represented in their literal antagonisms, and the most terrible incidents are environed by the commonest and most playful realities of actual life.

Shakespeare's tragedies, then, exhibit the most perfect unity of composition and a potency and precision of language which no stress of feeling is allowed to impair or discompose. The scenes succeed each other by a process of organic sequence; and there is the closest, most inward, and vital relation of all parts and episodes, all persons and incidents, to the one fundamental idea of the poet's predetermined plan of action;[1] whilst in his swift and sudden alternations from gravity to gaiety, he shows himself a perfect master of the powers of arresting and compelling interest. All the elements of his tragedies, in short, hang together not by a mere formal and outward juxtaposition, but by the most essential and inward coherence and congruity. With such consummate art does he manage and manipulate his dramatic personages, the passions by which they are swayed, and the circumstances in which they are placed, that it would be difficult, if not impossible,

[1] See Gervinus *ut supra*, 863.

to point out in his maturest work a glaring instance of disproportion or unfitness;—a delineation in which there is a positive and self-evident forfeiture of verisimilitude, or a scene dramatically sterile, tedious, unnatural, or confusing. I at least know of no instance in which Shakespeare in an episode of moment or in a character of first importance sins against the laws of dramatic probability or dramatic design.

IX.

On this characteristic much more might be said. But space failing for this, I proceed to remark that the probability or strict dramatic propriety of our poet's *dramatis personæ* is convincingly proved by the fact that everything appears to proceed directly and naturally and originally, under a vital law of human transpiration, from them and not from him. The poet does not ventriloquise through them, but acts rather as their mouthpiece or instrument of expression. They are not puppets inexpertly agitated; images of merely fancied existence deduced from fixed conceptions of specific attributes. They speak not even "as authors, but simply as men;" as living beings ideally created in whom may be discovered a perfect concord of head and heart, of inclination and will. They move in their entirety, easily and without starts; and what they say is to all practical intents and purposes their own opinions and sentiments on the subjects that are successively handled, albeit these thoughts and feelings are all ultimately drawn from Shakespeare's own consciousness. For Hamlet and Henry and Othello, and even Iago, are flesh of his flesh and bone of his bone; creations that exhibit no mechanical process of construction, but growth of a vital kind, and give expression to doctrines and ideas which it was his mission and that of his age to promulgate. But it would be unsound and uncritical to speak of their deliverances which, with perfect insight and almost inconceivable delicacy of mind, are assorted and attempered to their respective natures and the circumstances and influences under which they are represented as acting, as being perfectly idiomatic

of the poet himself and of his present surroundings, like the magnificent series of Sonnets, which are strictly original and self-delineative.[1] For Shakespeare does not impose his energetic personality upon his speakers. They are not mere masks behind which he retires in order to utter with greater ease and fulness his own thoughts and opinions. It is only by a special act of reflection, indeed, that we realise his existence at all, his individuality is so completely concealed or subdued by the objects and characters he brings before us. He is entirely free from an absorbing egoism; and hence it is always extremely difficult to determine the precise outline of his personality, to mark its steps and its boundaries, to recognise where the living man expresses himself behind the historic mask, or to estimate with anything like exactitude the amount of subjective idiom that exists in his most elaborate dramatic deliverances.

Shakespeare is sensible of the existence of independent centres of self outside himself; and can at will throw his imagination and transfer his consciousness and wisdom into the nature of his characters, from whose mouths every thought and every sentiment appears to proceed as if generated vitally and spontaneously, like the fruit blossom or the vegetable bud, out of the nature within them, and to dilate insensibly without effort or inflation. For the time being the forces of his oracular genius seem to be alienated from their original owner, who gives himself up unreservedly to his creations, and abdicates his past and present possessions in their favour. Or as Landor, ventriloquising through Petrarca, puts it in that memorable passage of unmatched power in the "Pentameron" which treats of the episode of Paolo and Francesca,—"The great poet, like the original man of the Platonists, is double, possessing the further advantage of being able to drop one-half at his option, and to resume it." By which, I presume, is meant that a great poet like Shakespeare leaves his own nature or disindividualises himself. It is by self-abandonment, in other words, that he attains life. He is of no party and no age. He is in no way committed to the manners or mortgaged to the opinions of his race. His genius "seeks to defend us

[1] See Hudson, 'Shakespeare: His Life, Art, and Characters,' i. 174-176.

from itself"; and his spirit, overleaping the fence of personality, diffuses itself, and ascends out of its purely individual limits into a catholic existence. He does not aim at minutely copying nature—merely copying the actual is to degrade it—but seeks rather to address the world "through an entirety," and serve as an instrument through which the universal mind may act originally and with organic regularity.

Hence, as has been pointed out, a certain apartness from humanity, or dramatic self-aloofness, which is always an essential prerequisite to permanent success in the higher regions of artistical production, is one of the most markworthy characteristics of our poet's genius. It is not so much his own words and thoughts and ethical sympathies that one hopes and expects to find in Shakespeare, as the words and thoughts and primary sentiments of Humanity; the vital ideas and veritable pulsations of human minds and human hearts "blood-tinctured, of a veined humanity"; the elementary emotions of which men in every age and every clime are fully cognisant, and which he simply presents with masterly reality and force in his dramas. In brief, the true mark of the dramatic poet is the power thus to disindividualise himself; to renounce, that is, his own personal prejudices, desires, and will in favour of his characters, who might be described as pistillate plants fertilised by Shakespearian pollen; to expand and idealise if he cannot conceal or cancel his own experiences; and to allow his characters, suddenly stimulated to more earnest vision or smitten and inflamed into gnomic utterance by the "fructifying divine breath" of his genius, to become for the moment the outlet or vent of the mind of Humanity.

X.

And this naturally leads me to say that Shakespeare's characters are not only human and probable but essentially *representative*. It is this indeed which gives permanence to what would otherwise be as ephemeral as the loosely constructed legends or the half-forgotten fables on which his plays are based. Some-

thing has already been said in these pages of the poet's habit of painting a character—as in the case of Pistol or Polonius—from some single example of sixteenth-century life. But this peculiarly Jonsonian practice is one to which Shakespeare only occasionally lends himself. As was pointed out, the artistic aims and methods of the rival poets are quite different. As a dramatic mechanist Shakespeare's natural method, in other words, is not so much to produce individuals as to create types, each of which, as an ideal realised—like Helena, who is the embodiment of will, or Isabella, who is the embodiment of conscience,—condenses a world of examples and reflects something of the essential mystery of human life. To illustrate a little more in detail the marvellous catholicity of mind which invariably marks his representations, let me give four examples; one from the single tragedy which appears in the first decade of Shakespeare's authorship, and the remaining three from two of the four great tragedies of the Third Period of his art-life.

And first glance at the typical feature of Romeo's character. The competent critic does not regard him merely as an individual mixed up in the fierce feudatory brawls of the rival houses of Montague and Capulet in the Verona of the fourteenth century. He towers above these shadowy historical occurrences, and presents himself as a type of romantic young lovers in all ages; as one, in short, in whom the sovereign passion of humanity at large is poetically idealised. This it is which compels and sustains our interest. This is the import of the delineation, which is ideal in the largest acceptation of the word. Shakespeare first generalises on the beginnings of all human passion; and then he tells us a story of an individual and concrete affection between two most exquisitely organised beings.

Love, observe, is only *real* when it fixes on the *real object*. And the poet would have us understand that the strength and intensity of affection are not to be regarded as proofs of the intrinsic value of the object, but of the largeness and capacity of the soul that loves. Thus Romeo, pursuing the mere shadow of love, first appears sighing for Rosaline, caressing his own thoughts and embracing his affliction rather than his love; but presently

when, following the practical counsel of his far-seeing kinsman Benvolio, he examines other beauties—

> "Compare her face with some that I shall show,
> And I will make thee think thy swan a crow"—

he forgets the paragon, and awakens to a new and fuller sense of life as he discovers moving amid the motley crowd of maskers at the Capulets' feast, with artless and unstudied grace, like a "snowy dove trooping with crows," the radiant and more responsive Juliet, *in* whom he realises his true ideal and *through* whom he discovers his own emptiness and his own want. As Paris is built from the quarries beneath it, so over the hollowness of his past life Romeo rears a temple of Love; and, with all a holy pilgrim's devotion, dedicates it to the "dear saint" of his suddenly inspired idolatry.

Probably there is neither historical nor traditional ground for assuming that any such preliminary passion as that with which Shakespeare inspires his Romeo exists in the original of Luigi da Porto (who appropriated the story from Massuccio) and Bandello. But the poet well knew, quite as much perhaps from personal experience as from observation, that "a vague, indeterminate condition of mind and heart usually precedes the ordeal known as falling in love." And therefore, following the attractive and interesting poem by Arthur Brooke, and the story of "Romeus and Julietta" included in William Paynter's 'Palace of Pleasure' (1566-67), he represents Romeo, who lives in a dream-world of mere emotion and whose entire nature is steeped in feeling, as already in love with the cold and disdainful Rosaline before he yields his heart to the ardent and sympathetic Juliet. Coleridge pronounces this to be one of the strongest instances of Shakespeare's fineness of insight. And the remark is well founded. For love is the mighty remedy for all blunders of heart and life which itself engenders. Love and be jilted, you must love anew. You awake from one dream only that you may dream again. It is a monarchic power this that rests upon necessity, and claims dominion through all your life. It maintains identity in spite of distinction, so that a new-born passion

is simply the reappearance, after an interval of folly, of the one immortal and presiding genius of human life that *will* not let you go until it bless you. Your pitcher may be broken, but the fountain still remains as full as ever.

In this exquisite love-tragedy a distinction is sharply drawn between the early, unrequited, shadowy attachment, and the sudden seizure of the soul by a passion which, as the sequel shows, rules even stronger than death itself. Romeo's first love is not his supreme love. As with the polyanthus or the primrose one flower sometimes grows out of another, so the first love suppresses and envelops itself in a new existence. The icy Rosaline, pale as a lily bleached with rains, a being whom neither passion nor persistence can melt or move, is the mere vague and vapid ideal, the dreamy, moonshine image of Romeo's passion-haunted soul prone and prepared to love. Juliet is the vivid and vigorous reality who ripens and perfects the passion, who delivers him from love-sick self-consciousness and rouses him to that prompt and efficient action which true love alone inspires. As regards Rosaline, it may be said, indeed, that as the grapes ripen by disleafing of the vines, so Romeo's self-generated passion, "starv'd with her severity," passes with that unconscious spontaneity which Carlyle affirms is the inevitable characteristic of all right performance, into a richer, riper, nobler form when once his soul is fired by the vision of Juliet, whose whole nature glows with the warmth of natural sentiment, whose heart, waiting for the kindling touch of passion, is fraught with purity and tenderness, and safeguarded by its own simplicity against all distractions and delusions of fancy. And thus Shakespeare seeks to show that all affection is susceptible of rapid metamorphosis: that it is liable to change by the mere wane and waste of time, or apt to assume new forms and crave a new and higher object, or lose itself in the glow or shadow of a deeper passion. This is made plain by the two quaint lines in the chorus at the end of the first Act—

> "Now old desire doth in his death-bed lie,
> And young affection gapes to be his heir."

And so Romeo, "without ceasing to be a son of the house of Montague," as the case has been well put, "becomes a type of all the sons of the house of Love."[1]

XI.

Look now at Lear. The unnatural but philosophic Regan, even whilst endeavouring to justify her own cruelties, reveals the typical feature of his character and provides the proper key to its interpretation. She says—

> "To wilful men
> The injuries that they themselves procure
> Must be their schoolmasters."

Precedent to almost every great physical misadventure or loss, there exists a corresponding moral error or wrong. To his past moral state, at least, it is due that Lear's physical position is what it is. Through the mad obstinacy of paternal prejudice he accepts with avidity the full-mouthed protestations of an entirely spurious and sordid affection, and rejects with violent cursings that sacred, silent, self-forgetful love which can never find any just measurement in words. And from this single error all the tragic issues spring—his deposition from royalty, his pariah-like isolation, his immitigable despair of soul, his wild excitement of mental agony, that eventually hurls him into the black chaos of madness :—

> "Oh Lear, Lear, Lear!
> Beat at this gate that let thy folly in
> And thy clear judgment out."

In a word, the kingly-hearted but age-weakened Lear in his luxury of sway or anxiety to govern others has madly forgotten the primary duty of self-governance. He is simply the impersonation of a fatuous absolutism. His madness is moral as well as

[1] The words quoted are those of Mr T. Hall Caine in an article entitled "Two Aspects of Shakespeare's Art," in the 'Contemporary' for June 1883 —an able essay which I have found to be helpful and suggestive.

physical; indeed the perversion of the moral sentiments plainly precedes the loss of the faculty of volition, in which intellectual insanity, pure and simple, may be said to consist. It is not directly attributable to senility or hereditary taint. It results rather from that despotism of self-will, which in its uncontrolled exercise opens the way for the black and subtle crimes of his unnatural daughters.

The partition of Lear's kingdom, his treatment of the divine but curse-dowered Cordelia and the devoted but banished Kent —these are the convincing proofs of that judicial blindness and unhingement of moral powers which existed prior to, and independent of, the inhumanity of Regan and Goneril, which only ripened the incipient malady into active madness. For the sins of Rome, the fate of Rome; for the sins of Sardanapalus, the fate of Sardanapalus. And so also of the self-centred and wayward Lear, whose fate is determined by his own sins and shortcomings, which are objectified with such ghastly fidelity in the ghoul-like sisterhood. Had he loved his children wisely and unselfishly, there would inevitably have been that reciprocation of benefits which true and disinterested love invariably inspires. Had he watched the development of their nature he would perhaps have been able to nip the growth of the moral weeds himself had planted in these "pelican daughters," especially that unbridled, unguided self-will which reacts so fatally upon himself, and which, as we saw in a previous chapter, is the pivot on which turn all the disasters which befall the leading characters of the play. Had he, in fine, controlled and mastered himself, he would not eventually have been overmastered by the uncontrollable malignity of those sister-fiends who owed him not only allegiance but life. And so Lear becomes a type of tyranny transformed into absolute impotence; a great and familiar type of nature self-betrayed and wrecked by one false illusory passion; a tragic generalisation on the fatuity and feebleness of those who, in their eagerness to govern others, have forgotten the elementary duty of self-mastery.

XII.

But turn now to Othello, than whom perhaps no Shakespearian character is more painfully misunderstood. Our poet has a certain course of action marked out for him in the Italian tale. But neither as regards the evolution of the story nor the portrayal of individual character does he follow implicity the authority of the novelist. We have already seen how he unfolds the ill-constructed and unsouled original story in the 'Hecatommithi' of Cinthio into a tragedy of surpassing grandeur and interest that claims the passionate sympathy of all. Observe now what a magnificent type he makes of the Moor of Venice, who, as Rymer in his ludicrous criticisms upon Shakespeare, published in 1693, jocosely put it, figures in the Italian fable as a mere jealous blackamoor; a light in which Schlegel and Horn, following no doubt an uninterrupted tradition of the theatre in Shakespeare's time, have also mistakenly regarded him. Their error, however, involves no more, perhaps even less, culpability than that which attaches to a certain strain of present-day criticism, that professes, in defiance of the plainest evidence of a contrary tendency, to regard Othello simply as a vain, haughty, splendid, yet mendacious Eastern, with a burning passion and a cruel hatred.

The character, no less than the details of the story, undergoes a marvellous re-creation in the mind of Shakespeare. He knows that the interest of his drama cannot well be supported and sustained on so slender a basis as the union of a black general with a beautiful wife liable to be courted by her husband's officers, out of which circumstance, certainly, tragic issues may be made to spring; and that in order to be universally appreciated the central point of its spiritual import must lie in something deeper and better than the vulgar passion of jealousy, which is quite erroneously supposed to be the offspring of love. And therefore, while adopting the general outlines of the Italian story, he vindicates his own originality, and produces a tragedy which contains something better adapted than "the eternal and vulgar figures of jealousy and innocence" to purge the passions. He

shows us a fierce internal conflict between love and honour; and in the sharply drawn contrast between the crafty, envious, relentless Iago, with his essential earthiness and intellectual sensualism, and the open, generous, tender-conscienced Othello, with his barbaric innocence, his firm faith in purity and goodness, his large and liberal views of life, he discovers to us the true import of his tragedy.

Shakespeare also knows that it would involve the assumption of a gross improbability to make a veritable negro plead royal birth, or to allow a man marked by all the common features of negro repulsiveness to win the affections of a beautiful Venetian girl like Desdemona, so still and quiet of spirit, so refined in taste, so delicately nurtured. And therefore, with infallible artistic judgment he lifts his hero out of the originally vulgar character of the black man with a fair wife, and transforms him into a tawny Mauritanian prince—a high and chivalrous Moorish chief, who combines a true sense of Spanish and Italian feeling, and claims to "fetch his life and being from men of royal siege." In order to touch the general mind and heart, he removes Othello from all mean and petty conditions of life, and in order to intensify the strangeness and splendour of his strong manhood, he throws around him a luminous mist of romance. Shakespeare, in a word, whilst keeping him free from mere conventional virtues such as "chamberers" have, makes him a perfect and peerless gentleman, albeit in the quick fierceness of his awakened suspicion he bids Iago set on Emilia as a spy, and, with his relentless intolerance of dishonour, plots the assassination of Cassio, and strikes and subsequently murders Desdemona.

Now, what is the poet's aim in all this? Does he wish to illustrate a special and vicious predisposition to the low passion of jealousy in the noble nature of this sturdy warrior? If so, Cinthio's barbarous, full-blooded blackamoor, with the thick protruding lips, the low forehead and retreating chin, the thin beard and half-frizzled hair, would do quite well for that. But that is not his object. He has greater business in hand than to show us the pernicious effects of this dreadful overmastering passion which so fatally disturbs the steadfastness of man's mind. The solemn

agony of Othello, who has no peculiar aptitude for such a passion, bears no resemblance whatever to the terrible disquietude which accompanies the prying jealousy of Leontes in "The Winter's Tale," or the wild frenzy that follows the morbid suspiciousness of Leonatus in "Cymbeline." The freakish, hate-engendered jealousy of the one, in which there are essentially gross, mean, malignant elements added to much that is "hideously grotesque," proceeds upon the merest trifle—the slight indiscretion of the queen in her relations with Polixenes; yet it rules and confounds all existence. The inbred jealousy of the other, whilst it has nothing of this hateful light-mindedness or impious levity, nothing of this low-thoughted petulance or gross personal resentment, still overflows upon life and manifests the same eager preparedness to catch at straws upon sudden and unforeseen emergencies, as the ready acceptance of the romantic wager upon the virtue and fidelity of the snow-white Imogen abundantly proves. The passion of the first answers the description of Iago, with whom jealousy is "a monster that doth make the meat it feeds on," magnifying whatever it sees, and imagining many things that have no existence. The passion of the second is native to the character; a thing self-generated and self-nourished, that may lie dormant for a season, but which appears full-grown as soon as born; whereas the passion that wrecks Othello's life is cautiously and gradually introduced, fanned and heightened, and artfully developed to an awful climax of murder and suicide by the criminal suggestions, the ingenious stratagems, the almost supernatural power of the traitor who stands by his side. Nothing can be more opposed than the natures of Leontes, Leonatus, and Othello. The Moor is not a passionate but a valiant and high-minded man, who does nothing that denotes a jealous temper already formed. He is a being respected, as Montalto affirms, for his wisdom and gravity; and until his love, once so steady and serene, is disordered and disturbed by the dread vision of physical adultery that lets loose a dark fierce flood of despairing passion in his sensitive soul, he shows a stern, sedate, immovable mood. "I have seen the cannon, that, like the devil, from his very arm puffed his own brother—and can *he* be angry?" asks the surprised and in-

credulous Iago. Othello certainly doubts, like those with whom I am contrasting him, before he has any proof—all three, indeed, are from the first doubt-ridden dupes of falsehood—but he does not proceed upon his doubt until the forged proofs supplied by the Ancient have turned it into a conviction; and even then his treatment of Desdemona—unlike the retributive schemes devised by Leontes and Leonatus in respect of Hermione and Imogen—is judicial rather than revengeful, as I shall have occasion hereafter more fully to point out.

It is not the power of the passion of jealousy, then, that Shakespeare desires to exhibit. He intends to show us what it is to lose all faith in human worth and virtue, what it is to have all honour forfeited, all hope blasted, all happy love forsworn, and the power and pride of life for ever quenched. In other words, he depicts a human being vitally wounded; a nature distracted, disorganised, and destroyed by the almost superhuman arts of a malignant devil, whose craft is so subtle, and whose designs are so involved, that a lordly creature with such august simplicities of heart and life, so far from being expected to escape from being taken in his toils, deserves the more respect rather for being outwitted and overmastered by him. We who are so thoroughly partakers of Iago's secret may at first feel a touch of scorn for the man so easily gulled; but on reflection the feeling of half-contemptuous pity is exchanged for one of unqualified admiration for the noble and valiant Moor, who always appears to the discerning eye as a man not of physical passion only, but of lofty soul and resolute will, whose free and open nature, which has no dealings with what is curious and occult, and whose large and generous eye, which takes a liberal view of life, lead him naturally and inevitably to think "men honest that but seem to be so." The whole transaction, in short, augments our love rather than abates our respect for him.

Shakespeare from the outset resolves that this impetuous child of air and fire, who has lived a life of storm and pressure, and yet is one "whom passion cannot shake"; whose nerves have been hardened by twenty years of war and shipwreck, and yet is one who, beset by the black and subtle slanders of Iago, falls into a

fit of ungovernable fury and swoons for grief,—for he possesses the calm majestic soul "of one not easily moved, but who, being moved, is stirred to the very depths,"—shall have no touch of jealousy. He shall be endued with solid and gentle qualities; with intrepidity and immovable calmness, manly frankness and generous magnanimity, bland modesty and self-possession, an austere sweetness and a resolute will. These are qualities which imply and presuppose a rare union of imperturbable repose and impassioned energy; qualities with which an inborn jealousy cannot live. In the general ordering of a character that is essentially open and generous, direct and single, such a contingency is wholly unprovided for. The Ancient himself declares that the Moor "is of a constant, loving, noble nature." And this when he is least inclined for fable. Indeed, as Mr Hudson has pointed out, it is Othello's absolute freedom from a jealous temper and all low suspicion that enables Iago to get the mastery of him; and, as Coleridge puts it, his machinations would not have proved successful, even after the Moor had given way to doubt, unless he had hinted—and, I may here add, given to his perfidious suggestions the convincing colour of truth by the fabrication of external proofs—that his honour was thoroughly and irretrievably compromised. Not jealousy, but love and honour, are the ruling emotions of Othello's soul. So that in the end, robbed of his love by devilish cunning, he clings tenaciously to his honour, that divine and inextinguishable gift which the unclean spirit of Iago cannot reach; and when, with tears of repentance he reviews the past, he can in a certain sense with truth affirm that he is "an honourable murderer, who has done nothing out of hate, but all for honour." Forced into a belief in the dominion of grossness, he struggles *not* to love the creature with whom he has garnered up his heart; and resolves in vindication of his outraged honour to destroy the being on whose existence his own life depends. This view at once makes the character and the tragedy possible.

Othello at the outset, observe, worships his wife beyond all limit and control of reason. On the undivided tenderness, the limitless devotion, the crystalline purity of this one beloved heart, he builds himself and his life. To the gentle Desdemona he

gives himself away wholly, body and soul, hopes and memories, thoughts and desires. And his love, so full of protecting tenderness, begins auspiciously. Desdemona, young in years, pliant in disposition, pure as the driven snow in thought and word and deed, has seen "Othello's visage in his mind," and her heart becomes "subdued even to the very quality" of her lord. Othello, the ideal of her romantic fancy, with whom she is determined to share the chances and changes of war and the rough tenor of a soldier's life, has accepted as heaven's best and highest gift the golden treasure of her innocent and untried heart.

> "If it were now to die,
> 'Twere now to be most happy; for, I fear,
> My soul hath her content so absolute
> That not another comfort like to this
> Succeeds in unknown fate."

No cloud of impending harm overshadows the brightness of their lives. There is no premonition of evil, no sensible prevision of woe. There seems to be no reason for hatred, no room for grief; nothing to provoke the malice even of the most unscrupulous. Standing on the threshold of the highest earthly joy, everything, in a word, seems to promise a stability of happiness to the newly wedded pair.

But there is a mighty and measureless power of villainous craft secretly contending against what seems to be so natural and so inevitable a consummation. The malignant spirit of envy is working strenuously to prove the futility of all mortal passion and the fleeting nature of all earthly bliss; preparing the ground and sowing the poisoned seed that is to spring and ripen unto destruction and death. The fair-faced false Iago, eager with the eagerness of utter wantonness to "set down the pegs" that make the sweet music of their mutual love, soon whispers into Othello's ever-open ear the diabolical suggestion that his fair idol is not so impeccable, so flawless as he fancies. But the Moor, though momentarily startled out of his habitual mood of immovable calmness, still glories in the greatness of his faith in the spotless and sunbright purity of Desdemona's sublime and invulnerable love,

and therefore laughs the horrid imputation to scorn. Presently, however, the improbable comes to pass. Accident steps in to maim and mar everything; to undermine and wreck the edifice of love and life which these two have raised. Othello, after all, has not sufficient moral stamina to repel all the attacks which Apollyon Circumstance brings against his soul. When Circumstance frowns on Desdemona he immediately distrusts his own original perceptions, and is taken in the toils of the tempter, hopelessly entangled in the nets which the ruined and revolted spirit of Iago has set for him. The wholeness of his faith is flawed by incipient mistrust; he "dotes, yet doubts, suspects, yet strongly loves." Can it be that she whom he thought so pure is yet so guilty? that she whose name was clear and "fresh as Dian's visage" has befouled her gracious nature with lechery and lust? Can it be that he has placed his perfect love and lavished all the heroic tenderness of his own nature on so worthless an object? "But yet the pity of it, Iago! O Iago, the pity of it, Iago!" These are the words, more terrible and touching than all "the sobbing Phrygian strains" in the domain of dramatic literature, with which Othello abandons himself to helpless and hopeless despair. The spell of their passion shakes the very seat of thought and feeling. Not jealousy and revenge, but moral indignation and regret, create in his bosom a horror of great compassion, an unalleviated intensity of tragic pain. The idea that virtue should fall so low—this it is that rouses that tempest and storm of divine rage and godlike pity which shakes his strength of spirit and bows his high heart down.

But of what is Othello thinking in the midst of his convulsive agonies as he listens to the excruciating detail of the Ancient's slanders against Desdemona? Of killing the amiable and nobly disposed Cassio? Never at all. It is that way that jealousy of the heart would lead him. But the Moor, little disposed to jealousy by nature, only thinks in the madness of the moment of killing her slanderer. Seizing Iago by the throat, he adjures him to prove what he has said, or, "by the worth of man's eternal soul," he had better have been born a dog than answer his awakened and heart-stricken wrath:—

"If thou dost slander her and torture me,
Never pray more; abandon all remorse;
On horror's head horrors accumulate;
Do deeds to make heaven weep, all earth amazed;
For nothing canst thou to damnation add
Greater than that."

But, alas! fate is inexorable and works against Othello. The evidence of his wife's infidelity seems to be forthcoming. Iago produces his forged external proofs, and instantly the half-formed suspicion is transformed into an unalterable conviction. He discovers that Desdemona has desecrated all his gifts, and "turned his very religion into sacrilege." The irresistible invasion of this dread fact changes the entire character of the man, and adds the bitterest pang to the humiliation of his overthrow. Then indeed all the grace and consecration of nature, all the gladness and glory of life, all the pure and independent personality of the man, are gone. Neither poppy nor the juice of mandragora "nor all the drowsy syrups of the world" can ever again restore to him that sweet rest which was his to enjoy but yesterday. His worldly advancement had been the sweeter, because she had shared it; his mischances and hair-breadth 'scapes and moving accidents by flood and field had ceased to be terrible memories, because she had pitied and rejoiced at his triumphs over them. But now he is robbed not only of the honours he has won, but of the spirit that nerved him to win them. Life holds out to him no further prospect of noble achievement. His heart becomes sterile, and is no longer upheld from desperation by a high-strung fortitude. He thinks himself degraded and despised, and gives way to brooding over improbable and impossible things. He is not the slave of passion or of feeling merely, but of his own imagination, which not only conjures up a repulsive voluptuous picture of Desdemona's rapid conquest but makes of himself an object of scorn and loathing. His stained and wounded marital honour shakes his strong manhood to reckless and ungovernable fury; and his resolute will is no longer able to subdue or control his emotions of shame and disgust. Seized with a paroxysm of contempt for the whole race, and borne down by a feeling of mistrust

of himself, his occupation sickens and his military ardour forsakes him, and he no longer takes delight in the "pride, pomp, and circumstance of glorious war." Othello detaches himself from the world and follows his own bent; he will admit no guidance, and be subject to no dictation. Stranded and helpless amid the wrecks of life, he can however devise but one terrible remedy for the evil that has befallen him. Desdemona must die to prevent her from sinning further; and he, too, with her; for the same indignation that rouses him in the bitterness of his sorrow against his wife, urges him to take vengeance on himself. Retribution and atonement must go together here. If the annihilated honour of the husband is to be vindicated by the sacrifice of Desdemona, an expiation must be performed to the manes of the broken-hearted father not only by the immolation of the daughter who had abandoned him, but by the sacrifice of Othello himself. Such a catastrophe is as sternly foredoomed in the character of the Moor as it could be in the character of any one of the great protagonists of ancient tragedy, such as Œdipus or Orestes, whose fate is foretold by an infallible oracle.

Here, then, we have another splendid type, representative, perhaps, of a still larger section of the human family. A heart which nature intended to be warm and loving and trustful is turned against itself, and breaks away from the control of reason. Othello, with all his exotic grandeur and high nobility of soul, with all his self-reliant judgment and indomitable energy and rich and varied experience, has no faculty for "curious inquiry into complex facts," and manifests all the foibles and weaknesses of the man who builds his ideals too high; distrustful of himself, since he has none of those petty vices to verify the treachery which ultimately he is so quick to suspect, he loses his bearings whenever he is confronted with any deep problem of casuistry or of conduct; "being wrought upon" by the inscrutable practices of his malignant and unrelenting enemy, he is "perplexed in the extreme," and, as the sequel shows,—this, observe, is the one peccant part in his otherwise perfect nature,—is as apt in the later stages of these proceedings to seize upon trifles light as air in confirmation of that base suspicion which, bred and born of Iago's poisoned

innuendoes, gnaws his noble heart, as he is swift at the commencement of the history to make an idol out of slender virtues.[1]

XIII.

Now glance, finally, at Iago, whose character is of a type the exact contrary of this. He is something more, however, than an organic opposite and dramatic contrast or mere foil to Othello. By which I mean that, although modern psychology scarcely furnishes perhaps a precisely similar example of a deranged balance, he in a certain sense realises, apart from his associates and surroundings, and independently of the particular passions and proceedings which he originates and controls, a distinct and separate type of character which represents a larger section of the human family than one cares at times to believe. In other words, he is a born sceptic; a cold intellectual sensualist and atheist of human virtue; a criminal by instinct as well as habit; a being less likely, I think, to figure ultimately, as a great living poet has imagined, in "the sepulchres of fire" or "the dykes of Malebolge," than in one of Swedenborg's excrementitious hells. For, if he has the astuteness and malevolent intellectual force of a Machiavelli and the devilish and victorious ingenuity of an Aretino, he has also the original malignity of nature, the callosity of heart, the inflamed individualism of a Borgia, and the dry pruriency of mind, the science of filth and corruption of a Rabelais, who feeds the imagination with foul pictures, and whose soul literally revels amid lewd thoughts and lascivious images. And if Shakespeare, who had an intuitive knowledge of the Italian character, or an access to the secrets and structure of the Romano-Italic race by some higher method than by experience,—witness his Shylock and Bassanio and Antonio, his Portia and Nerissa; characters whose living prototypes might easily be found in the Venice of to-day,—meant anything by the realisation of the type which Iago represents, it was surely, as Mr Caine conjectures, "to point to the inevitable pitfalls that lie in the path of the born sceptic," or, in

[1] See Caine *ut supra*.

other words, to exhibit in a concrete form the inevitable retributions of spiritual nature.

Passionless, highly intellectual, widely and accurately learned and skilful, Iago represents that familiar type of man who, voluntarily withdrawing from the atmosphere of moral sentiment and subordinating all intellectual and spiritual forces into means to a material success, inevitably takes a low and cynical view of humanity in general. In his settled contempt for nature and life we discover the root of bitterness from which are evolved the ripened fruits of practical atheism. With him self-interest is the measure of friendship, self-love the essential basis of domestic affection, personal gain the one potent incentive to honesty, and a bodily wound of greater consequence than a blemished reputation. He has renounced the dominion of the sentiments of piety and generosity, of gratitude and sincerity; and, scorning the sacredness of all human traditions, resolutely and for ever closed his heart and mind to all impressions and inspirations from without. His restless and vagabond intellect, in short, has "cast off all allegiance to the moral sense, and become a law unto itself." So that we hear him frankly foretelling his intentions and briefly summing up his own experience of human nature in some such words as these: Man is a damned rascal whose wretchedness always outweighs his felicity. The world lives by humbug and so will I. Everything is possible to the resolved mind that acts with the solidity and precision of natural law. The only right is what is after my own constitution: the only wrong what is against it. Why, then, exaggerate the power of virtue which is so often at the mercy of insomnia, or an indigestion, or some derangement of the biliary duct? and why struggle like a puling and whining infant crying for the moon—adds this light mocker in effect to Cassio—to be an angel before your time? "Virtue! a fig! 'tis in ourselves that we are thus or thus." And for my part I shall be content with what is unjust, with the triumph of folly and of fraud; with the debauched fool Roderigo, that "poor trash of Venice" whose purse will help me; with the "voluble knave" Cassio, whose besotted amiability and chivalric enthusiasm and unsuspecting shortsightedness will prove serviceable in the carrying out of all my

projects. All the "power and corrigible authority" lies in the will. Wherefore I shall not trust to peddling sentiments or rely on petty affections, but shall help myself with my own hands and my own head and "plume up my will in double knavery." He who "works by wit and not by witchcraft" is capable of patience and prudence, and can bide his time—time on which my nimble "wit depends." This, observe, is no imaginary account of the impiety and atheism of this intellectual Caliban. On the contrary it is a faithful paraphrased rendering of the actual outleakings of his thought-swarming mind as these shape themselves in the four great monologues of Iago, who represents all things with scrupulous accuracy and candour, yet with consummate falseness.

I remark, in the next place, that the Ancient is "nothing, if not critical." But his criticism is always the criticism of the Foreworld Momus, that false Spirit of Blame which blind and sleepless, unrelenting and unholy, points only to what is morbid, impure, destructive. He applies his base and brutal theories to life, illustrates them with startling fertility of style, and gives them the inspiration of a vivid imagination and a cruelly keen experience of men and women. This dread contriver of hellish plots, who "knows all qualities, with a learned spirit, of human dealings," but to whom a perfect soul or a perfect love is an utter impossibility—for Iago is misanthropical of malice prepense—begins with the meanest, most degrading estimate of woman, from whom he expects neither chastity nor constancy, and whose love in its purity is to him indistinguishable from lust in its shame.

> "Lust, through some certain strainers well refined,
> Is gentle Love, and charms all womankind."

So sings the Bard of Twickenham. And the outrageous couplet might be taken as a brief summary of the essentially hircine and satyric creed of our conscienceless Ancient, who reduces all the characteristic impulses of woman to instinct; regards adultery as the most commonplace thing in the world; continually diverges into the most morbid pathology of the amatory passion; and, inaccessible to earthly strokes, and incapable of heroic suffering and rage, steadily and unconcernedly contemplates his own wife's

reputed infidelity, which produces no other effect in him than to intensify the original malignity of his unclean spirit, to which the shame of *every* woman is a quite credible thing. His dismal creed involves the negation of every natural affection and the absence of all passion and emotion; and might be summed up in his own aphoristic saying, "Put money in thy purse";—*that* will overcome all opposition. In no other Shakespearian character, not even in the misanthropical Timon, do we find directed against the sex such heartless and profane levity, such scorching satire and such scoffing wit. Nowhere, indeed, in the whole range of our poet's dramas, in which many hard things are undoubtedly said against the sex, do we find such atheism of womanly truth and honour, or such a strenuous attempt made to corrode and lower by stern and bitter wit the ideal of the womanly character—of the *ewig Weibliche.* This significant quality of saying indecencies without shame and of ventilating coarse allusions and loathsome opinions about love and woman, Iago, it may be observed in passing, has in common with the great French sceptic Michel de Montaigne.[1]

This experienced soldier of fortune, who has travelled over the world from Syria to England and become acquainted with the horrors of the sixteenth-century wars, from which he has drawn "the maxims of a Turk and the philosophy of a butcher," has a stubborn and invincible pride of intellectual force and mastery too, that inclines him to the egotistic persuasion that he can, by the mere flexibility and suppleness of his thought, monopolise and usurp all other minds; and, by his wily dissimulation and more wily frankness, use every man as his instrument or tool. And need I say that this inordinate lust of power is in fullest measure gratified? With perfect self-possession and presence of mind he works and winds and governs to his purpose all with whom he

[1] The frivolous French essayist thus writes of Love: "I find that love is nothing else than a thirst of enjoying a desired subject; nor that Venus is anything else but the pleasure of emptying one's seminary vessels, similar to the pleasure which nature has given us in discharging other parts."—Essays, iii. 5. Compare Iago's speeches in Act i. scene 1, ll. 90-120; and Act i. scene 3, ll. 322-369.

comes into contact. Roderigo and Cassio and Othello become in his hands blind instruments who obey his every behest. He knows no impediment to his will; and each victory achieved only magnifies his strength and fertility of wit, pampers his fiendish thought and purpose into a towering audacity, and becomes a new weapon in his hand. Every fresh demand upon his criminal resources seems in effect to replenish his stock. His course of action, as we learn from some of his soliloquies,—especially those in Act i. scene 3, and Act ii. scene 1,—is, as a rule, determined *ex re nata* or incidentally. But his sagacity is so penetrating and imperturbable that he is never at a loss for a shift, never betrayed into a false step, never surprised into a pause. So that all who come within the sphere of his influence are in certain danger of contamination, and in his fatal presence inevitably sink below their normal level. Like a loadstone amongst splinters of steel, he catches and subdues to his purpose all with whom he is brought into contact. Distrusting their own original perceptions, they mistake moral obliquity for moral rectitude; and renouncing their own understanding, come by a series of imperceptible gradations to see everything in the false or distorted light in which Iago, with self-pleasing virulence, would have them see it. A consummate master in the arts of dissembling and of simulation, all suffer from his proximity and the contagion of his crime—Emilia, Cassio, Roderigo; even the noble-souled Othello and the heavenly innocent Desdemona, whom he reaches through their virtues, and ultimately blasts, crushes, and down-tramples by playfully reversing all moral distinctions and maliciously turning their honour and integrity against themselves, are deeply bedaubed with the hell-venom of this remorseless spirit.

> "When devils will the blackest sins put on,
> They do suggest at first with heavenly shows,
> As I do now: for whiles this honest fool
> Plies Desdemona to repair his fortunes
> And she for him pleads strongly to the Moor,
> I'll pour this pestilence into his ear,
> That she repeals him for her body's lust;

And by how much she strives to do him good,
She shall undo her credit with the Moor.
So will I turn her virtue into pitch,
And out of her own goodness make the net
That shall enmesh them all."

As to motives, Iago, who is always transported with guilty thoughts and imaginations, has, strictly speaking, none. He acts more from negative than positive impulsion; and may be said to possess a reserved and inexhaustible force which acts directly by presence and without means; a certain undemonstrable power by whose impulses he is almost insensibly guided, for he is confessedly a typical representative of the essentially *impure* man who cannot see the action until it is done.

"'Tis here, but yet confused:
Knavery's plain face is never seen till used."

The guilt in its germ, that is, exists anterior to the supposed or plausibly alleged causes of his diabolical machinations. And what are subsequently suggested as motives indicate a foregone conclusion, and come simply as afterthoughts to appease the hunger of his reasoning powers, which, on a sudden emergency, —as, for instance, when he has to assign some reason to the poor gull Roderigo in order to ensure the success of his scheme, —invent "a sort of *ex post facto* motives" for his fiendish purpose. The inward workings of guilt, in other words, act as a sort of inspiration to him. He is a kind of malignant philosophical silk-worm, spinning his cocoon out of his own fertile, ever-active, but pestilent brain. His "invention comes from his pate," he says, "as bird-lime does from frize." He was already minded to act as he does, only there needed something to stir the evil heart into exercise, to untie the hands of the born criminal, and breathe fructification on the secret purpose or indwelling germs of sin. Undoubtedly an external temptation evolves the latent features of his character and develops the upspringing purpose to which from the first he has been inwardly instigated. But his devilry is an original self-accelerating gift, and would have manifested itself without any such external stimulus, and

irrespective of any of those provocations which he falsely affirms he has received from Cassio and the Moor. For evil has confessedly (Act iii. scene 3, l. 448) usurped his eyes and ears, and converted them into self-deluding organs, so that he cannot choose but see and hear things that are not.

The conclusion that Iago's purposeless wickedness bursts up spontaneously from the original founts of nature, is, I think, sufficiently borne out by the fact that his envy is not restricted to the infirm yet noble-souled Florentine, Michael Cassio, whose military advancement and promotion over him naturally galls him. It is even more active in the sight of the General's domestic happiness, especially when he witnesses the raptures of Othello and Desdemona at their first meeting after the sea-voyage, than in view of his own military retrogression and frustrated hope. It is not a sense of depreciation or wounded pride, but the perfect happiness of the hated Moor that acts as a spark to the magazine of wickedness that is in him. It is not when he is brooding over his imagined wrongs or the loss of the lieutenancy, but when he is watching the full content, the ecstasy of love, the conjugal endearments of Othello and Desdemona when they meet at Cyprus, that he breaks forth into his most violent transport of jubilant ferocity. This of itself is profoundly symptomatic of his criminal aptitudes and his moral predispositions. In short, his whole course of action is developed under the fatal charm or fascination of evil, and simply gives objectiveness to the internal workings of premeditated guilt. Free from remorses of conscience and strangely dead to the wickedness of his enterprises, acting more from moral insensibility than brutalised depravity, yet with a full consciousness of villainy in every scheme that he concocts, Iago is found continually hugging to his loveless bosom the self-pleasing delusion that what he does falls far short of the just revenge of his honour which, with the fury and venom of infatuation, he "half tries to make himself half believe" has been wantonly and deliberately outraged by Othello. Empty of virtues and wholly preoccupied with vices himself, he can discover no positive virtues whatever either in man or woman. Being himself depraved, he naturally believes in the depravity of others.

He recognises a certain absence of vice in the Moor, who "is of a constant, loving, noble nature." He sees "a daily beauty" in Cassio's life that makes him ugly; but he resents it as an injury and regards it as a vice rather than a virtue; and such is the crass materialism of this malignant being that when Roderigo speaks of the most blessed condition of the gentle Desdemona he scornfully exclaims, "Blessed fig's-end! the wine she drinks is made of grapes: if she had been blessed, she would never have loved the Moor. Blessed pudding! Didst thou not see her paddle with the palm of his [Cassio's] hand? didst not mark that? . . . Lechery, by this hand; an index and obscure prologue to the history of lust and foul thoughts." Iago, in a word, never misses an opportunity of injuring his associates by suspicion, by calumny, or some other and secret machination of envy; and the stratagems and vengeance of such a man may be said to be simply the natural and inevitable consequences of his character, life, and training.

Here, then, is another subtly mixed and profoundly interesting type, representative, it must be feared, of a large section of the human family. Iago either shows a total perversion or a complete absence of moral sense. He is born with a predisposition to evil which delights, like all other natural forces, in self-manifestation. Living in a realm where morality wields no authority, and where no sound fruit of human reason can ever ripen, Iago, who, with the impulsive badness of the born criminal, enjoys his diabolism, is, strictly speaking, incapable of virtue and insusceptible to love, a stranger to heroic suffering or restraining desire, or even awe of the divine Nemesis; and furnishes an admirable generalisation on the secret possibilities of evil and of the dread certainties of punishment which are wrapped up in the spiritual constitution of the man who impiously subordinates the moral to the mere intellectual part of his being. Let it never be forgotten that Retribution is a vital element in Shakespearian Drama, which darkens down, at every shuttle-movement of the weaver Circumstance, towards a great penal catastrophe of suffering and death for the erring individual, as surely and inevitably as the Greek Drama of Æschylus or Sophocles darkens down towards an all-

encompassing calamity of family doom at every shuttle-movement of the weaver Destiny.

XIV.

Now the point which these remarks are chiefly meant to enforce is, that Shakespeare's usual method of projecting character is to generalise on character; not to reproduce individuals or pictures illustrative of a mere class of persons, but to create generic types, which are essentially symbolical, and can never be extinct in life. To this artistic end all the various elements of his drama are impartially subordinated. And yet, as Coleridge has observed, individuality is everywhere, whilst mere portrait is nowhere, albeit the poet, working upon given methods to a single aim—viz., the presentation of human character in its real and living play—occasionally paints a character direct from some single example of contemporary life, and even derives from his own individual experience the very names of many of his finest creations, as Sir Edward Hamley has recently demonstrated in his delightful dramatic idyl of "Shakespeare's Funeral."

Romeo and Lear, Othello and Iago, are representative men, animated with an intelligent spirit, fully developed in all human faculties, and generated out of Shakespeare's own individuality—not fixed conceptions of specific attributes, or products of an artificial and transitory state of society, whose purpose and character are fashioned by the peculiar circumstances of a particular age or people, nor concrete studies of special affliction derived from circumstances accidental and inessential; but histrionic exhibitions of the very mind and heart of universal humanity, or, as I have already said, the interior or fundamental drama of the soul and the world embodied in concrete forms, and individualised by the exercise of will and the living expanding force of the poet's genius. The same remark applies, of course, to Hamlet, Henry, Macbeth, Brutus, Coriolanus, Antony, and Shylock, the typical features of whose characters have not been illustrated or discussed here simply because my space is limited, and a multiplicity of examples seems superfluous for my present purpose. In all of

these figures, however, there may also be discovered the good and evil elements that are inherent in man : they are the contemporaries of every generation ; and, as Victor Hugo rightly says in his otherwise extravagant and erroneous monograph on Shakespeare, "from each of them results, in the eyes of the thinker, a humanity." By which is meant that our poet's delineations of human life and human character have not only the subtle truth of nature and a kind of historic verisimilitude which retains them in the faith and memory of men, but they possess in addition all the completeness and spiritual enchantment, the genetic force and inexhaustible variety of nature ; all the poetry of movement and impassioned thought, all the animation of joy and pain, of deep-rooted association and supreme event,—in a word, all that has lived on the earth and all that has passed away from it is brought up again, in changeful procession, before the eyes of fancy, by means of these great representative figures whose elements seem to us in our shining and more apprehensive moments to have had their origin from our own thought.[1] It is this fact which accounts for the permanent supremacy which they exercise over the minds of men. There is no imaginative remoteness or injurious superiority about them. Their spirit diffuses itself ; and what they know, they know for us. They extend our area of life and multiply our relations. They teach us the qualities of primary nature, and engage us to new aims and powers. There is no end to their aid. Their knowledge agrees with our private experience, and their ideals satisfy our hopes and expectations. In fine, they are lenses through which in a certain sense we read our own minds and divine our own destiny.

Living men and women are, as we have seen, Shakespeare's special study. And their relations and their contrasts form the most enduring elements of interest in a drama which professes to interpret human nature to itself, and to mirror man's existence as it appears to imagination enveloped in the living and breathing atmosphere of mortal passion ; a drama which is distinguished indeed from all other dramas simply by this, that it is "Genius conceiving of Human Life," and conceiving of human life in such

[1] See 'Blackwood's Magazine,' v. 217, 218.

a way that it immediately transfigures matter-of-fact into matter-of-meaning, and makes all private experiences cosmopolitan in their reach and everlasting in their significance. For Shakespeare devotes himself quite as much to what Carlyle calls the *dynamics* of human nature—that is, the vital, primary, and unmodified forces and energies of man, such as love, pity, fear, wonder, religion—as to the *mechanics* of human nature, by which is meant that "complexity of practical details and processes" which one discovers in daily life and in "the actual society of every body politic"; and his drama, which remains strictly local and national and true to the epoch of its origin, still acts as a placid mirror held up to nature, and reflects not only those topical and transitory truths which are so apt to intervene between us and the deeper spiritual significance of all human events, but emblems forth what is permanent in man beneath the customs and costumes and creeds of any age or nation. Touching the innate and unacquired sympathy of the poet and the depth of his intuition into the essential qualities of universal nature, Mr Lowell has a strain of criticism that ought always to go with this subject. "While other poets and dramatists," he says, "embody isolated phases of character, and work inward from the phenomenon to the special law which it illustrates, he seems in some strange way unitary with human nature itself, and his own soul to have been the law and life-giving power of which his creations are only the phenomena. We justify or criticise the characters of other writers by our memory and experience, and pronounce them natural or unnatural; but he seems to have worked in the very stuff of which memory and experience are made." And it is this quality, let me add, which gives Shakespeare an easy pre-eminence over all his precursors and contemporaries.

CHAPTER VIII.

MORAL SPIRIT.

I.

Now if, after this long review, I were asked the question, *In what does the strong personality of Shakespeare's poetry consist?* I should be disposed to answer that it consists, first, in the natural inclination of the poet for the active side of life, in the intense earnestness and assiduity with which the unusually large number of qualities, intellectual and moral,—qualities that are often not only remote from, but apparently opposed to, each other,—which are represented by his higher poetry, such as "Hamlet" and "Othello" and "Macbeth," are directed towards the realisation of positive concrete fact; secondly, in the absolute unity in which these various and seemingly antipathetic qualities are blended in the dramas, whose superior worth and power may be said to arise from the poet's emotions of wonder and of awe, his energetic interest in real transactions, and his vigorous application of noble and profound ideas to human life—what Matthew Arnold, with signal acuteness, has called the most essential part of poetic greatness; and, thirdly, in the sincerity and masterful moral strength which results from the united expression of all these qualities.

And this last may with propriety be regarded as the crowning excellence which differentiates the work of Shakespeare from that of all other poets. For it is false criticism to say, as Addison

said, that Shakespeare's dramas fail in morality when compared with those of the Greek tragedians. In each case, it is true, the moral is conveyed in a different manner and by different means. That is inevitable. For, whilst the subjects of Athenian tragedy are taken from the gross mythology of Greece, and are treated in a religious spirit by Æschylus and Sophocles—although their preternatural modes of life, and the sanctity of the ceremonies in which their tragedy arose, are certainly far removed from what may be termed the spiritualities of religion—the Shakespearian plays are essentially mundane in their basis, and in treatment are only indirectly Christian, their ethical effect being produced by an appeal to the individual conscience. And yet it is an undeniable fact, that for a nineteenth-century audience "Othello" and "Macbeth," or "Hamlet" and "King Lear," have a far deeper moral significance than the "Agamemnon" of Æschylus, which is based on a deed that is repugnant to the natural and moral order of things, and closes with a revolting spectacle of triumphant tyranny and crime; or the "Œdipus Tyrannus" of Sophocles, which De Quincey boldly calls the model and paramount tragedy on the Attic stage;—partly, no doubt, because, unlike the majority of the Greek tragedies, the curiosity of the spectator is powerfully excited by the dreadful catastrophe—but which is, nevertheless, seriously marred by glaring improbabilities in the action of several of the *dramatis personæ*, and especially in the character of Jocasta and the protagonist of the piece.

In Greek tragedy man is the passion-puppet of a foreordained Fate. But in Shakespearian tragedy the human will is the central pivot of character and action. A dark unmoving fatalism, that freezes "into marble life," broods continually over human existence on the Athenian stage; everything is fixed by an irrevocable decree; in no true sense is there any development of human character, or any flux and reflux of human passion; but in Shakespearian drama fate is no blind external force to which man falls a sacrifice: the one fatality is the fatality of individual character, gradually excited and stimulated into criminality by the accidents of life, by tyrannical Circumstance, or the vicissitudes of fortune. The interest is made to turn upon the gradual evolution

of character, or passion modified by character. In other words, the real instruments by which Fate works and determines the lives of mortals are the unbridled passions of man himself, which weave the web of human destiny. As in the case of Othello, it strikes down the murderer by the murderer; in the case of Lady Macbeth, it punishes the crime by the crime: their monstrous sins spring direct from the original founts of their own nature; their passions grow and kindle under the eye of the spectator; and in the end they simply pay the penalties of vitiated powers and of violated functions. Beyond and above their furious impulses, however, we recognise in a moral order of the world, which works efficiently though cryptically, the divine presence of Justice, the divinity which shapes their ends, and which inexorably directs them, in spite of themselves, to that mysterious goal of retribution towards which it inevitably tends. The tragic motive in the Titanic and ultra-human Greek Drama is "the impotence of man in the face of moral law or necessity; in Shakespeare's tragedies it is the corruption of the will, some sin of the individual against the law of God, which brings its own punishment."[1] In fine, the capital distinction between the Æschylean or Sophoclean and the Shakespearian conception of tragedy is just this, that whereas in the latter liberty exists and melioration is possible, the fate and passion of the *personæ* and the burden of tragic consequences are, in the former, essentially fixed throughout. Liberty does not exist. Œdipus, for example, after he has made his first fatal discovery, waits breathlessly for a doom that cannot be evaded. No sustaining hope survives, that by human energy or power of character things may be mended and fate antagonised. A tremendous weight of woe, a necessity that girds the world and does *not* comport with liberty, holds him down to his place, and cannot be annulled. Othello, on the contrary, does in an hour what no succeeding one can ever cancel or undo; but in the supreme moment of crisis he is a free agent and the arbiter of his own destiny, and it is only when the culminant catastrophe is reached and realised that his whole life is thrown under the dominion of an unalterable necessity. And the insipidity and

[1] W. J. Courthope, 'Addison' (English Men of Letters Series), 117, 118.

worthlessness of Addison's objections to Romantic Drama, as contrasted with the Classical Drama of Greece or Rome, may be judged from this, that he comments in a spirit of absolute puerility upon its thought and sentiment and expression, as though he were ignorant of the fact that the nature of the action, in which the principles of Shakespeare's moral views discover themselves, is the really essential question that presents itself for judgment to the critic.

The basis of our poet's mode of thought on ethical questions is to be discovered not so much in those opinions which, since they are found most frequently on the lips of his purer and more ideal characters, and are evidently dwelt upon with the greatest complacency, may fairly enough be regarded as those which are predominant in his own mind, but in the moral justice which is displayed in the development of the action. The inculcation of formal moralities is not the primary object of tragedy. The scope and moral office of the higher drama is to represent life in all its strength and weakness; to show the development of character as it manifests itself to the world in deeds; to depict human weaknesses, vehement feelings, violent mental emotions, and insurmountable desires "idealised in grander figures and more awful results" than are to be met with in everyday life. For, if we are to be raised above ourselves by the sight of human nature in its struggle with good and evil, it must be by action on a grand and idealised scale; by catastrophes in which heroes perish nobly like Brutus and Othello, and for no mean and contemptible faults. Human and interesting in itself, the ideas which Shakespearian drama embodies are completely apprehended. Natural and essentially mundane in its basis, the experiences it pictures are intimately felt and most thoroughly perceived. Witnessing a nature, more or less noble, degenerating under the preponderance of mighty self-revenging passions that conflict with the normal moral elements of true humanity, our own passions are purged and purified by the pity and terror which the spectacle evokes.

II.

Shakespeare does not proclaim moral truth by express and direct precept, or inspire us with feelings of delight and disgust in right and wrong by any didactic method of morality, but by illustration and example, by the living impulses of active life as evidenced in his great delineations of human character, which are not æsthetic idealisations of nature merely, designed to please the languid mind and soothe our indolent emotions in our leisure hours, but moral pictures of unvarnished truth intended to touch the heart, quicken the conscience, purify the emotions of the mind, and, as Gervinus rightly says, "develop in us that true self-love which strives to make the good and the beautiful its own."

Thus he shows us in Romeo how excess of love is blighted; in Timon how excess of hatred leads naturally to impotence, despair, and death; in Antony how suppression of great mental powers and the native rectitude of genius in favour of debasing luxuries and the pampered sensuality of a voluptuous nature, produces a similar result; in Coriolanus how the noblest virtues of old Roman manhood, unguarded by the strengths of reason and self-respect, degenerate into gigantic vices when once they are overstrained by the influences of uncontrollable passion, or inflammable pride, or despotic self-will; in Angelo, the "outward-sainted deputy," how selfish suppression of the senses through an exaggerated idea of virtue, invariably avenges itself in the sanctimonious self-deceiver by opening up a terrible and unsuspected abyss of evil in his own nature, and bringing him to shame and ruin; in Hamlet how a constitutional excess of the reflective tendency and the hesitating deliberation of an unstable will disqualify for, or mislead in, action, and produce the impotence of a blind destructive fury instead of the strength of a sane, clear-seeing, executive energy; in Lear how pride and passionate wilfulness, or ignorance of true love and a morbid and selfish pleasure in false professions of affection, result in unappeasable remorse of conscience and a vast and prolonged

agony of soul and body; and in Othello how a free and noble nature, naturally chivalrous and trustful, grandly innocent and great in simple heroic action, but wholly unversed in the complex affairs of life, is easily ensnared by the malignant deceits of a debased Italian, learned "in all human dealings," whose lithe serpentine energy swiftly overmasters the barbaric simpleness of his incurious, unsuspecting, and defenceless soul.

Shakespeare, in short, feels that immoral and lawless acts, like vices and virtues, are all of a comparative degree; that morality, in other words, is essentially so complicated a matter, so closely bound up with subtle and ever-varying relations, with manifold conditions of life, with inexplicable motives, that it is impossible, or fruitless if possible, to bring it to a system of final principles. And therefore he does not aim at making men virtuous by formulas of ethical science, by the positive letter of religion and of law, but by illustration and example, which may be fully and completely received and understood by all; by the creation of symbolical or prophetically typical characters in whom the dazzling passions which agitate humanity in every age may be discovered vacillating between vice and virtue.

From a world-commanding eminence Shakespeare makes a full, complete, reliable survey of humanity. With the equal and impartial eye of the pure artist, he paints all sorts and conditions of men in their animation of joy and pain, all phases of fortune or misfortune which end in the ruin or restoration of the soul and life of man. Thus representing life with an unparalleled breadth of view, yet with wisely balanced admiration and caution, he teaches, like life itself, "by indirection," to borrow a phrase from Mr Lowell. That is to say, the law of goodness is obviously bound up with his æsthetic qualities, and the principles of moral rectitude are closely interwoven with the nature and truth of what he depictures in his tragedies; but he teaches by the eye instead of the ear, by actions rather than by words, by living types which become the exponents of the combination of perfect and imperfect qualities that is to be discovered in nature, and exhibit the tragic consequences of human action,

instead of by cold, lifeless, spirit-cramping doctrines of practical wisdom.[1]

And he who fails to perceive that the moral element holds, constitutionally, the first and central place in the mind and muse of Shakespeare, has certainly read these "Othellos" and "Hamlets" and "Macbeths" to but little purpose. No writer, I venture to say, is more deeply imbued with morality, or treats, in poetry, moral ideas with greater energy, subtlety, and sunny breadth of view. No poet has made the fundamental principles of Christian ethics more catholic and universally intelligible; or touched holy subjects with a deeper sentiment of unaffected reverence; or communicated a sympathy at once so large, so comprehensive and Christ-like, that it not only succours and sustains afflicted virtue, but casts a benign halo of restorative resurrection on human frailty that brings down calamities on its own head. In a word, a love of virtue and genuine greatness is manifestly the animating principle of his poetry, which has for its aim—if the art of one who is purely and primarily poet can be said to have any shade of didactic purpose in its face at all—the conversion of those emotions of pity and of terror which naturally result from the study of such products of reason and imagination into pure lives and perfect action.

Shakespeare's touch on questions of conduct and taste is seldom, if ever, insecure and casuistical; never capable, when fairly tried and tested by the healthy moral sense and unbigoted reason of mankind, of corrupting the manners and undermining the innocence of the young, or conveying lessons of wantonness to the weak or inexperienced, in whom a morbid sympathy is always easily excited by the misfortunes of vice. The moral sense is not offended by doubtful hints or undisguised indecencies, nor debilitated by seductive and soul-warping representations of "innocent adulteries" or "benevolent butchers," or by any attempt to render "that amiable which religion and reason teach us to detest."[2] Shakespeare airs no truth that

[1] See Lowell, 'Essays on the English Poets,' 144; also Gervinus, 'Commentaries,' 919.

[2] Gervinus has a passage that hits the core of the matter: "His heart

degrades the beautiful, depicts no beauty that diverts from goodness, sets up no ideal that is irreconcilable with ascertained fact. His poetic sentiments are principles of conduct that enlarge the circle of study and reflection, increase the dignity and power of men, and, even now, sustain us in the warm fierce fight for freedom and for truth. In fine, he not only moves our hearts and stirs our imaginations, but satisfies our reason and our conscience. And, co-operating "with the benign tendencies in human nature and society," his dramas, with their wise knowledge of the world, their large assuaging and reconciling toleration, their penetrative and fortifying insight into permanent sources of joy and sorrow for mankind, are destined in larger and fuller measure to become efficacious in making men nobler and wiser and happier.

> "Fair, kind, and true, is all my argument,
> Fair, kind, and true, varying to other words;
> And in this change is my invention spent,
> Three themes in one, which wondrous scope affords."

So sings Shakespeare in the 105th Sonnet. And it would be difficult, I think, to find a more complete and characteristic description of the unity, morality, and many-sidedness of his dramatic art.

III.

But even granting that thus far I have made good my position, I frankly confess that some explanation may still with reason be demanded of me in respect of the seeming inequality or injustice

is as fresh as his head is healthy; his feelings as genuine and deep as his judgment is rich and tried; his inclination is in such harmony with his will, and his moral efforts with his understanding, that, as from an æsthetic point of view, the ideal and beautiful in his art concur with the truth of his sensual and spiritual intention, so, from an ethical point of view, the good and the moral coincides with this same truth, so that ever in increased degree the same one, entire, normal being steps forth, whose peculiarity, as Hudson said, lies in his lack of peculiarities, in his generic properties, in the united perfection and in the equal balancing of his powers."—'Commentaries,' 930, 931.

with which good and evil are distributed in these tragedies, and the ambiguous or equivocal manner in which, at the end, the poet seems to leave the vital and absorbing question of right and wrong.

Shakespeare, as has been shown, allows his drama to grow up gradually from its inception to a climax. Having from time to time surprised and startled us by means of striking incidents and unexpected events and subsidiary casualties that stagger and arrest —those "starts and attitudes" of ingenious dramatic invention which, though not the basis of its essential principle, are yet salient features of Shakespearian art; especially in such productions as "Hamlet" and "Macbeth"—he gathers up and concentrates all his energies upon the closing scene, into which he throws all those most potent elements of misery and terror which dominate and depress and destroy human life. Instead of allowing his drama to sink back again into a condition of relief and repose, like the statuesque productions of the Attic muse, he prolongs and intensifies the strain and stress of grief and gloom, and leaves the agitations of sympathy in the reader or spectator untranquillised. As the plot thickens and develops, the horrors accumulate; and at the close of the tragedy, instead of visibly showing forth a hope in futurity as the solution and consolation of all sorrow, or assuaging human grief by any express vindication of goodness, the poet, as a rule, leaves the emotions of the spectator at utmost tension.

When in "Hamlet," for example, the last curtain falls, it is on a stage that is literally strewn with dead bodies. And it would appear that you have nothing on which to rely for relief or consolation but that pithy dogma of a doubting creed which has been so fruitful of critical theorisings and wild conjectures,—"*the rest is silence.*" And so likewise in "Othello," to give but one other instance where perhaps a profusion of examples is not called for. Here, too, a "bloody period" stops the story. The sorrow seems to be reliefless, the sin inexpiable, the slaughter purposeless and savage. Our final gaze is fixed eagerly and questioningly on the "tragic loading" of the Christian marriage-bed where Desdemona and Emilia and the Moor, struck down in

the fulness of their joy and the plenitude of their grandeur, lie massed together still and cold; and all of mercy that the sickening sight provides is to be found in the terminal passage of the play, when in the wildness of his waked wrath the wonder-wounded Lodovico exclaims—

> "The object poisons sight;
> *Let it be hid!*"

At the close of these "Hamlets" and "Othellos" the spectator can hardly repossess himself of the peace and fortitude which such exhibitions require, or regain that equanimity of mind which the tragic issue has so deeply disturbed. And it was this circumstance, it may be remarked in passing, which mainly incited Voltaire to denounce Shakespeare as a barbarian, a "barbarous juggler," a *Gilles de la Foire*, a *vilain singe*, and so forth.

Shakespeare, it need not be said, reveals in the course of his delineations much of the everlasting greatness and majesty of man. But he usually leaves him at last in weakness or unreason, in poverty or anguish, and foregoes all explanation of the complex life-problems which he continually presents to us. And since he studiously withholds any expression of private opinion, some critics affirm that it is impossible to say for certain on which side his own sympathies lie, or how he means to move ours. He writes a fine description of suffering, they say; but always stands aside from any attempt to prevent or mitigate human evil or stem and divert the dark fierce flood of fate that bears down upon his characters. With the utmost fidelity to fact he exhibits the feebleness, fatuity, and failure of man; but always holds himself aloof from any act by which human pain may be visibly assuaged or human goodness directly vindicated. Why, ask these purists and sentimentalists, whose views have always a tendency to become abstract or notional, does he not indulge in far-off visions of glory and greatness like Dante and Spenser and Milton, and forecast the triumph in the life to come of purity and patience and faithful passion? According to the prevailing theory of such critics a tragedy, like the "Autos" of Calderon or the "Samson Agonistes" of Milton, ought to conclude with something that

might be called a moral, with something that irresistibly uplifts the thoughts of the spectator to a region that lies beyond "the sphere of our sorrow," or, in other words, that it should terminate "in peace of spirit and sublime repose."

Now it is needless to say that if Shakespeare's productions are to be tested by such a rule as this, the most cursory examination will at once satisfy us that he is no model dramatist. The human race is always the real protagonist of his plays; and consequently in the realisation of life, rather than in the enforcement of a dry dogma or a detached principle of individual or social or theistic ethics, we find all the energies of his intellect concentrated. He does not invent a catchword with which each separate achievement of his muse may be ticketed. Nor does he tag on to the end of his play as a sort of "practical application" a moral precept in enforcement or elucidation of what has gone before. In the force and felicity of his characterisation, and not in the formal enunciation of ethical doctrine, his power as a practical teacher is to be discovered. According to the Aristotelian definition, the primary aim of tragedy is impassioned action, not a particular condition of men. And Shakespeare's dramatic apocalypse of man is made in conformity with this rule of art. He exhibits human character in its real and living play. Each of his dramatic personages is represented as a vital, self-developing, and incalculable organism, instinct with all the mental and moral attributes of our common nature, encircled by the same wonders, environed by the same mysteries that surround our own complex life, in which the coarse mingles with the fine, the mean with the heroic, the humorous and grotesque with the tragic and the terrible. His characters are not automatic embodiments of selected qualities always in a fixed state of formation. Neither are they got-up figures designed to illustrate some sectional or permanent phase of moral life, and therefore entirely explicable.

Wise and sustaining maxims Shakespeare certainly has in rich abundance. But as for a moral, introduced deliberately and of set purpose, he tells his story so well that it needs none. The plain and positive concrete facts of life are in themselves so potent and so precious that they require no such formal or

adventitious ornament. In the ethical as in the æsthetic direction the highest triumph lies in concealment. And therefore our poet practises a rich economy, and hardly ever breaks away from the hard-and-fast law of dramatic self-aloofness. He does not put his own individuality into any of his characters, as Freiligrath, Mézières, and Taine would have us believe; nor does he pour himself out in every strife in which he engages them. Always keeping "our moral sympathies in the right place without discovering his own," he refuses at every stage to abide the peremptory question of the curious. The art of concealing art has never been carried further. And perhaps at no period in the gradual evolution of these tragedies does the poet exhibit this characteristic "gift in taciturnity" more definitely than at that great epoch of spiritual discovery, the moment of physical death, when his Hamlets and Othellos disappear into wide-devouring darkness, and leave us gazing, wordless and grief-stricken, on the blood-stained bodies that bestrew the stage, whose wounds, "like dumb mouths, do ope their ruby lips, to beg the voice and utterance"[1] —of the poet's tongue; but beg in vain!

For in such circumstances Shakespeare regards silence as the fittest mood. A man's fate is developed and determined by his deeds. Action is the revealer and solver of all things. He simply discovers to us the unrelenting law of causation which dominates the moral life; and demonstrates the impossibility of a man extricating himself from the consequences of actions which may stir pity or excite remorse, but which there is no undoing. There is therefore no necessity, on the one hand, for Elijah-like translations or such sacred thaumaturgy as Calderon employs; no need, on the other hand, of any such Faustus-like hell-flashings of fire and terror as Marlowe displays. As I said in a previous chapter, one knows as well as can be whither Iago is inevitably tending, and whither Desdemona has already gone.

Thus there are plainly two kinds of emphasis in things poetic: the emphasis of sound and the emphasis of sense. And here, as the wise man who speaks only of that which he knows, as the true artist who deals only with phenomena, and who conceals,

[1] See Antony's *éloge* over the body of Cæsar—"Julius Cæsar," iii. 1, 260, 261.

yet exposes himself, in the changeful life-picture that he paints, Shakespeare utters himself forth in these tragedies in a sort of wordless but prophetic spirit-song of rising and falling worlds, the meaning whereof he leaves each one of us to *think out logically*, and, at leisure, unfold into clearness.

> "Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard
> Are sweeter,"

Keats tells us in his immortal "Ode"; and a greater than he is obviously of like mind. Shakespeare leaves us to piece out with our own thoughts what of imperfection or incompleteness is here to be found.

IV.

Now, since every one admits that the perfection of art is attained when no traces of the artist are to be seen, it is somewhat strange that the dramatic self-aloofness of Shakespeare, and the so-called ambiguity of his endings, should form the basis of the charge so frequently preferred against him that his final conception of man and his mission is essentially subversive of true religion and sound morality. Simply because he pursues the soul of man to the brink of the grave and no further, or presents a problem that he cannot or will not solve, or makes an entanglement which he refuses to untie, or does not introduce at the end a *Deus ex machina* to close the debate that has been going on between good and evil by deciding in favour of one of the contending parties and against the other, our poet is held to be a denier of immortality, the coryphæus of deism, a sceptic, a fatalist, an agnostic by turns.

Is it possible to conceive anything more absurdly uncritical than this? Because in "The Winter's Tale" he makes the roistering rogue Autolycus say, "For the life to come, I sleep out the thought of it," an attempt is made to prove Shakespeare's denial of the doctrine of a future life. Because in "Othello" or "Macbeth" the poet seems to make no just distribution of good and evil, but rather sacrifices virtue to convenience, as if to meet

and satisfy the exigencies of his art, Johnson hints at his ethical apathy and religious indifference. Because he puts melancholy and misanthropical reflections into the mouth of Timon or Lear, or the Duke in "Measure for Measure," Hallam talks of his discontent, censoriousness, and contemptuous cynicism. Because in "Hamlet" he causes the Prince—the guiding spirit of whose religion, observe, is that the world is capable of being *understood*, and not only of being *observed*; and whom we therefore find strenuously striving after an idealistic solution of the philosophic enigma—to speak of the world as "an unweeded garden that grows to seed," of the firmament as "a foul and pestilent congregation of vapours," of man as a "quintessence of dust," and woman as "a breeder of sinners," with much more of the same materialistic tone and tendency, all which seems to invalidate or refute his ingrained faith in the existence of a God, Tylor speaks confidently of Shakespeare's pessimism. Because Gloucester says in "King Lear"—

> "As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods;
> They kill us for their sport,"

Swinburne—who, of course, with a dubious kind of unselfishness, always regrets the virtuous lapses of the poetic great—speaks of his more than Æschylean fatalism. Because, *inter alia*, he causes the Friar in "Romeo and Juliet"—which, by the way, is said to have a good many dark Lucretian touches in its love-philosophy—to allude to the earth as the womb of nature, adding thereto the reservation of "*perhaps* her grave"; and because he does *not* on the death of the lovers console the parents with words fraught with the evangelical piety of a Bishop Hall, Birch professes to find in this, as, indeed, in every other play, demonstrative proofs of Shakespeare's materialism and blank atheism. And because, as is alleged, our poet ends with a look *back*, never on towards anything beyond, and discovers only in his characters the consciousness of a moral law instead of the perpetual sense of the helpful presence of Deity—albeit Shakespeare is for ever speaking of "the Deity in our bosom"—Ruskin talks sadly of his lofty but mournful agnosticism. Every one of these writers, each in

his own way indulging in a criticism of "perpetual negation and fault-finding," gives it as his unalterable conviction that this wise religious man, whom Carlyle not inaptly calls the Saint of Poetry with whom it is impiety to meddle, and of whom Emerson, with pardonable enthusiasm, speaks as "our city of refuge" when priests pall and we tire of the saints, can tell us nothing that can give us peace as regards the destiny and hope of this wondrous human life of ours.

Now from all such criticism as this, which attempts to affiliate our poet and thinkers like Lucretius and Helvetius, or Voltaire and Leopardi, more of error than of insight is certain to be derived. These writers, in their attempts to form accurate conclusions as to the state of Shakespeare's final thought, have not brought to the consideration of his dramas a just temper of mind. By which I mean that they either neglect to treat them as great poetic wholes in which human life as we know it is represented as a spectacle *in theatro ludos*—the cause of the fatal misconception of Johnson and Birch; or else they deal separately with two or three plays which they regard as typical in all respects of the rest—the cause of the Hallam and Ruskin heresies.

In both cases these critics practise a habit of anatomical dismemberment. They condemn the effect produced without due consideration of the cause. They judge of the resultant action quite apart from the harmonious interplay of contrary forces which are necessary to the development of a conscious *motif*. They fix upon the final event without paying sufficient attention to the intermediate combinations of circumstances which prove its ideal necessity. To such an arbitrary method as this is especially due the shallow generalisation of Hallam, who from a cold arithmetical estimate of five plays draws the unwelcome conclusion that between 1600 and 1608, Shakespeare, being ill at ease with the world or his own conscience, could only express himself dramatically through one primary character, that, namely, of "the censurer of mankind."[1] And to this may also be attributed the criticism of Ruskin, who, so far from furnishing a full and faithful representation of the poet's final

[1] See 'History of Literature in Europe,' iii. 309.

teaching, gives an essentially *false* view of it, inasmuch as it fixes as final what was obviously at most but a transient phase of his thought.

Other writers, again, betray a somewhat petulant sympathy with the sorrows and ultimate destiny of the characters. They dwell upon the magnitude of Lear's misfortunes, upon the cruel fate that leaves the child-changed father dying with the dead Cordelia in his nerveless arms; or on the helplessness of poor Ophelia, so sweet but ineffectual in her life and love; or on the failure and incompletion of the life of Hamlet, who dies mute and unjustified; and point to the seeming unrequitedness of Cordelia's sacrificial and invulnerable love, or to the unbearable unexplainedness of Othello's destiny. But they do not appear to weigh the larger consequences which issue from these isolated aspects of man's life, or the chief causes and dangers in which they originated. Their spiritual insight is defective. Even their external observation wants subtlety. They fail to see any mercy or saving discipline in the suffering and sacrifice of these beings who are *not* without hope in their death; who have at least some secret faith in Him "in whose pure sight all virtue doth succeed." Even Hamlet with all his incertitude recognises a shaping-divinity in human fate, a divine purpose in all human events; and is as firmly persuaded as the clear-seeing Banquo himself that his own times and his own concerns are for ever in the hands of God. You say that his spirit is burdened with a mighty weight of weariness and inherited woe; that his heart is bruised and broken by an immitigable grief. Yes; but *the readiness, the ripeness is all.* And thus the end becomes interpretive of all precedent events. The underlying purpose of the tragedy is right and beneficent; and its conclusion is just that which crowns it with perfect justice and propriety. As we surmise the sun behind the pale-orange light of the widening dawn, or the moon behind the weirdly woven masses of silver-sheeted cloud, so we can at least surmise and divine the future which these dark dramas of Nemesis irresistibly open up to thought. Hence, when the last curtain falls on such performances as "Othello" and "Hamlet" and "King Lear," we should not cavil but reflect. We should not

merely look *at* life or *into* life, but *through* it. And the questions which we ought then to ask ourselves are these: How does "Othello" touch us? Whither is "Hamlet" meant to carry us? Does not "Lear," with all its pagan sentiment and Æschylean fatalism, bring us nearer to God and to Humanity?

But these, unhappily, are just the questions which too frequently remain unasked and unanswered. Men who have an inordinate craving for instantaneous effects are led to demand too vivid illustrations of the meaning of the poet whose dramas, it must be admitted, are no more complete and self-evident and visible to the very bottom than Plato's dialectics or Kant's metaphysic of ethics. When they cannot *see* at the first glance, they forswear all serious study, and refuse to *feel* their way through those chinks of revelation which they might easily discover for themselves without the aids and inspirations of a Coleridge or a Gervinus. And hence the stupid impeachment of the poet's endings. They will discuss the dramatic structure like Voltaire and Laharpe—the latter of whom, by the way, regards the handkerchief incident in "Othello" as irretrievably mean, albeit Shakespeare has ennobled it by the wild grandeur of its romantic history; but they shrink from making a study of the fundamental ideas of Shakespearian Drama like Goethe or Kreyssig, who deal not only with the method and materials, but with the aims and moralities of the work.

The sympathies and judgments of those who must always have love-scenes and happy endings necessarily become confused and confounded when they are called on to contemplate the incompletion and incoherence and mystery of Hamlet's life and death. In their eyes such a tragedy invariably wears the aspect of a puzzle with something wrong in it; an acrostic with a "light" left out. Indeed, without serious study, comparatively few discover in this drama of the interior—for "Hamlet" is in a peculiar sense a play that compels the reader to put himself at the hero's as well as the poet's point of view, and, as Goethe says, invites him to come *inside* to see the painted windows aright—the not uncommon history of a man ineffectually striving to find a clue to the invisible world; of his resultless attempts to put his hand upon the links

of mind and matter, and so reach the hiding-places of the soul; of a baffled but imperious intellect that, galled by the thought that anything should lie outside the domain of human intelligence, falls into false action, which is the natural fruit of false speculation, which inevitably cripples the effective power of man, and paralyses all heroic effort. What is depicted in Shakespeare's tragedies is simply an idealised picture of ordinary human life. Our own everyday existence is girdled in and crushed with the same anomalies, the same antagonisms of good and evil, the same awful silences of God on many problems which give such tragic pathos to "Hamlet" and "Othello" and "Romeo and Juliet." Life is full of incompletion and failure, and a resultless play of contrary and conflicting influences; full of crossed loves and frustrated ambitions, of broken destinies and shattered ideals, and romances that begin but do not end.

Because Shakespeare does not make his tragedies end happily, as Bacon maintained every poet ought to do, men charge him with fatalism or something worse. They regard every ending as faulty, it would appear, unless it resembles that lame and prosaic finale to the "Book of Job," according to which a concession is made in the epilogue to what the rest of the drama emphatically denies—namely, that virtue and vice always get their reward in earthly prosperity or adversity. Thus, when they see Roderigo and Othello, Emilia and Desdemona, cast down together in a common ruin, and the cold, impure, and soulless Iago left, defeated it is true, but alive, to witness the results of his diabolical scheming—a terrible spectacle of indomitable will not succumbing under threats and torture; a being "more fell than anguish, hunger, or the sea," and braving Heaven to the last—they rashly conclude that our poet, like the Chorus in the "Antigone" of Sophocles, deliberately takes the side of the wicked.

They forget that it is quite impossible for a poet who is influenced by the actual occurrences of human history always and openly to show virtue rewarded and vice punished. We cannot reasonably expect in every case a happy ending such as that which you have in the "Ajax" and "Philoctetes" of Sophocles, or the "Alcestis" and some other plays of Euripides, although

the first of these closes with a reconciliation which in a sense recalls the reconciliation scene at the end of "Romeo and Juliet." The pathos of failure has its place in life. And it must necessarily have its place in a drama which professes to give a faithful representation of the facts of the world that can be verified by the actual experience of the individual. If, then, instead of simply looking at the end, like the habitual novel-reader, for an interpretation of the life-problem in its final phase, such persons would patiently read and piously respect the gradually developing argument of each poem, and ascend from primary principles and intermediate incidents and final endings to a comprehension of the total product of Shakespeare's art, they would experience no difficulty whatever in determining the ultimate fate of his *dramatis personæ*, or in deciding on which side his own sympathies really lie.

V.

It is always difficult for one to resolve a poet's work into its final and residual essence, and deduce a fixed law or governing motive for all the complex and seemingly contradictory effects which are to be found in it. And yet such is the peculiar method and material of all Shakespeare's tragic work, that it imperatively indicates a leading or governing motive, and irresistibly suggests a fundamental master-thought. The principal motive which pervades his poetry, the master-thought which is to be discovered at the end of all his productions, is precisely that which is enunciated in the serious poetry of all nations. Homer, Æschylus, Dante, Calderon, Racine, and Goethe are all influenced and exercised by the pressure of the same idea. In the writings of each and all, amidst the clash and clamour of contending forces, through all the ebb and flow of alternate and opposing influences, there is discernible the same actuating motive which enriches and informs the Shakespearian tragedy.

What, then, is the ruling moral purpose of this poetry? What is its terminal characteristic? What is the idea that exerts a master-pressure upon our poet's spirit? Let me

attempt an answer to these questions in what remains of this chapter.

Taking either "Macbeth" or "Othello," or "Hamlet" or "King Lear," then, as the central example of the *idea* of all Shakespearian tragedy, I should say that whilst the primary conception of tragic circumstance is not the same, its leading purpose and culminating principle are almost identical with those which are to be found in the drama of Sophocles or Euripides. The Greek dramatist, it is true, produces an ideal picture of a life apart from and above the real, and subordinates the action of all his pieces to an influence originating beyond the sphere of humanity; whereas the English poet, whilst occasionally employing supernatural machineries for dramatic purposes, takes up the realities of human life as the vital basis of his tragic drama. The antique tragic life presupposes another and remoter life, and impresses one with a profound feeling of artistic idealisation. But the modern tragic life is simply the intense and complex life of men and women like ourselves, only selected and exalted. The English drama is positive and concrete. The Greek drama is abstract and imaginative. The characteristic aim of the former is reality and life; that of the latter, ideality and duration. The protagonist of the one is the man of time and passion; the protagonist of the other is the hero of a mysterious mythus like Œdipus, or Prometheus, or Philoctetes. The world of the one is the real breathing world of sight and sense; the world of the other is as ideal and visionary as the world of "Paradise Lost" or the world of the "Arabian Nights."

In Shakespeare you have the development of character and passion, the life of flesh and blood, of animal sensibility and spiritual power, always growing and kindling under the eye, always stirring and palpitating with the flux and reflux of hope and fear —a real, present, everyday life of multiplied action. But in Æschylus you have simply a show of events, a fixed situation, a statuesque attitude; a life awful, still, ultra-human; unmarked by the ebb and flow, the inspiration and expiration of mortal passion; uninfluenced by the tumultuous agitations of the fluctuating will; —a remote, mysterious, idealised life of *suffering and endurance*,

"translated into a neutral world of high cloudy antiquity," and not the actual and ordinary human life of *internal and external conflict and collision* between the powers of good and evil.[1]

According to the lofty hypothesis of ancient poetry, everything falls under the dark agency of Fate or predestinate misfortune; whilst in modern poetry, as we have already seen, the *fundus* of all tragic influence is essentially mundane, the only recognisable fatality being that of character. This variation in method constitutes, of course, a cardinal distinction between these two poetic forms. So far there is an essential disparity. But, otherwise, the Classical and the Romantic drama are substantially alike in purpose and result. For both obviously proclaim the victory by heroism over fate, and sin, and death.

VI.

It has been asserted, however, that not only is sorrow much more definitely connected with sin by the Attic poets than by Shakespeare, but that the victory achieved over sin and death is much more complete in the one case than in the other. But a very superficial survey will, I think, bring you to the conclusion, which a more profound investigation will only serve to deepen into settled conviction, that this statement of the case is either radically false or blamably overdrawn.

If you analyse the typical productions of Grecian art you will find that the ideal tragic mischief which continually broods over the actions of men and the history of families is also present, only under a different and truer denomination, in the Shakespearian tragedy. According to the Fate-scheme of the great triad of Athenian dramatists, there are three principal forms through which this dark avenging Power makes its visible manifestations. In the first place, you have the blindness or ignorance of man. This in itself does not necessarily presuppose sin, yet it inevitably leads to guilt and destruction. In this we discover the terrible significance of the individual life. In the second place, you have the far-

[1] See De Quincey on "The Theory of Greek Tragedy," Works, viii. 60.

stretching taint of sin: the visitation upon one person of the iniquity of another. For here sin, with its attendant sorrow, does not become effectual in the human soul simply by accidental propinquity or voluntary participation in pollution; but by direct imputation on the innocent. In this we perceive the grandeur of duty, which often demands the vicarious sacrifice of soul for soul. And in the third place, you have the repression of a benevolent will, and the complete or partial subjugation of the moral nature by brutal or tyrannous strength.[1] In this we have revealed the power of character and the vindictiveness of Circumstance.

In some such way as this, then, the dark problem of the Greek Tragedy is varied and modulated. And in the "Œdipus Rex," the "Eumenides," and the "Prometheus Bound," you have illustrative examples of the three principal forms under which the Greek *Fate* works as the inexorable if shadowy adversary of man.

VII.

Now, in the Shakespearian tragedy you discover a rational equivalent for the false and forsaken Fate-tenet of antiquity. The dark decrees of Destiny are not distinctly announced or separately contemplated. But everywhere the principle of fatality is visibly and conspicuously operant. Life oscillates between two poles—between despotism and anarchy; or stands fixed and helpless between two extremes—the extreme of arbitrary social authority and the extreme of arrogant individualism or personal independence. For examples of these two states of existence I refer the reader to "King Lear" and "Timon of Athens." In both cases a "shadow system" gathers round man's life. Buffeted, foiled, contemptuously cast out, the world seems to him harsh, mystic, and unfathomable. And at last he is hurried to his doom irrespective of himself.

His habits, in short, are largely in the power of those who lead him to contract them. The path which seems the path of duty leads to crime which mars his courage and defeats his hope. His

[1] See Ruskin, 'Modern Painters,' v. 214.

will is moulded or repressed by the irresistible dictation of relentless Circumstance, which often gives contradictory directions like the divine voices in the drama of Sophocles. His fortunes are raised or lowered by a sort of invincible Luck which always moves cryptically. His mind is disturbed by a deep-rooted dread of the divine Nemesis. And the final permanence of moral character which is reached and realised through weakness, wilfulness, or intemperance of strength, eventually places these Hamlets, Lears, Othellos, and Timons under the dominion of a Necessity as absolute and as terrible in the fatality of its results as that which is shadowed forth in the great and gloomy dogma of the Greek Fate.

Here certainly you have no Clotho, Lachesis, or Atropos—those inexorable sisters who with ever-moving spindles weave the fateful thread of human life in ancient art. But you have Chance and Circumstance and Accident represented as the shaping-powers of human fate and individual destiny. In this way Shakespeare has simply rationalised the grim and false conceptions of the Æschylean tragedy.

Based upon Christianity and its leading ideas a modern play must necessarily exhibit liberty and moral necessity as reciprocal and correlative things, not as mutually repellent or antagonistic forces. Character and Destiny therefore are here synonymous. Sin, as the outcome of man's free agency, is followed by sorrow. These two are always definitely and indissolubly connected. At the beginning man's fate is in his own hand. But afterwards it becomes a part of a divine and unalterable dispensation. In a sense the Christian conception of man and his mission has in it something of the old sphinx-fable. Life is a riddle which man has to read. Death, sadness, or waste of years is the penalty if he fails to solve its dreadful enigmas aright.

But you never really find in these poems an inexorable necessity directly opposed to the free volition of man's will. Here indeed there is not one of the many evils under which humanity, individually or collectively, groans, but which in its inception might have been avoided. Everything is distinctly and indisputably traceable to man's contravention, through ignorance or blindness, of the laws of nature which lie plain or discoverable before him.

The breach of these laws alone creates that "destiny unshunnable like death," to which Othello so mournfully alludes. Through man's blindness and presumption, his credulity and deficiency of self-knowledge, the principle of fatality works effectually. These dramas, as truly as the Sophoclean tragedies of Œdipus, reveal the doctrine of self-will and Nemesis. There is no such thing as casual retribution. Everything proceeds by rule and law.

Then, again, man is not the determiner of events nor directly the originator of the sin for which he suffers. In the modern as in the ancient tragedy, there is an overruling power of Fatality which visits the sins of the fathers upon the children. Man's Freedom is environed by Necessity. And Life itself is a trifle compared with Law. Shakespeare believes in the far-reaching pollution of guilt; in the dreadful and indestructible vitality of deeds; in the vicarious sacrifice of soul for soul. He has a strong sense of "the descending and entailed curse," so difficult to cut off, which follows family fault or ancestral transgression; which indeed cannot be averted or checked in its terrible course until an expiator appears who is willing to redeem from the sin and able to appease the wrath of the divine Nemesis whose vengeance it has provoked. In "The Tempest" he speaks of "the powers delaying, not forgetting" to stir up storms and incense the shores against the sinner. But his love-tragedy of "Romeo and Juliet" affords perhaps the most notable instance of this. For here crime spreads its evils over luckless human innocence. Just as the Orestes of Æschylus is made victim to the curse that brooded over the house of Atreus, so Romeo and Juliet are made "poor sacrifices" to the hate-bred curse that hangs over the rival houses of Verona. The "ancient grudge," the fearful family feuds, are expiated, atoned for, extinguished for ever by the "misadventured piteous overthrows" of those star-crossed lovers who come "from forth the fatal loins of these two foes," Capulet and Montague. In the children's death the parents' strife is buried. As the Prologue to the play informs us, it is only by the deadly visitation of the sins of the fathers upon their children that this entailed curse can be checked or removed.

You thus see that man here has a terrible inheritance of an-

cestral errors to redeem, obstacles to remove, mischiefs to undo. But he has also to redress wrongs, establish truth, secure liberty. Monstrous infidelities of soft and sensual mothers, unnatural murders by wily and lecherous uncles, presumptuous usurpations by cut-purse kings—these are things to be rectified, removed, avenged. The time is out of joint, and society has become effete. There is something rotten in the state of Denmark. Nay, Humanity has degenerated into a vast confederacy of evil; and the whole world has grown into an unweeded garden. "Things rank and gross in nature possess it merely." In such a world then is Hamlet placed. In him we see a great and lonely soul driven in upon itself by the deceit and desertion of friends, by finding all outward things turned desperately against its own internal personal standard of rectitude. The end and the aim of his being is to assert moral order in this universe of moral confusion; to breathe, as it were, a *Fiat lux* over a wild weltering chaos of darkness and obscurity. There is not merely a sacrifice to atone—blood to speak peace; but there is a spirit to cleanse and renew. Not vengeance simply, but a re-creation is that at which he aims. He would remove the penalty of sin by vicarious endurance, and its power by a thorough renovation.

In the corrupted Court of Elsinore, the Prince, like Electra in the polluted palace of the Pelopidæ, stands forth as the one solitary champion of right against might. And the one like the other never doubts that the heavenly powers will make justice prevail at last, and will see to the punishment of the prosperous wicked. He believes that a vast amelioration in the condition of the world is attainable. And he strives in his own dreamy, convulsive, intermittent way to attain it, with what result the reader knows. A single arm is powerless to reform and free humanity. The righteous, benevolent, self-assertive will of Hamlet rebels against "the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places;" but the larger, stronger, craftier life which he assails subdues, overthrows, destroys him. As Jupiter in the "Prometheus" tries to intimidate the benefactor of mankind, so here the god of *this* world frowns on and fights against the Prince, who fails and falls a pure and spotless victim in the

unequal strife, like a hero of Hellenic story. Such an idealist who loses in the keenness of his own emotion and the energy of his own resolve all practical capability, so that he is *never* able to mobilise the really efficient forces of his heroic, richly endowed nature for active service, is scarcely the kind of person to burst the bonds of despotism and reform the world.

Thus Shakespeare's dramas are seen to bear a strong resemblance to the Classic Tragedy. His "King Lear," his "Romeo and Juliet," his "Hamlet," are all sad dramas of Nemesis. Their action is dominated and controlled by what the heathen termed Fate, but what in Christian language is called Providence. And the three principal forms under which this overruling Power appears are in the ancient and the modern tragedy almost identical.

VIII.

Now, is the nexus or interdependence between sin and sorrow less perfect in "King Lear," in "Romeo and Juliet," and in "Hamlet," than in "Œdipus Rex," or "The Eumenides," or the "Prometheus Bound"? Is the victory over sin and death less visible and complete in "Othello," in "Macbeth," and in "Timon of Athens," than in the "Antigone," or the "Electra," or the "Phrenzy of Hercules"?

Lear sins blindly and ignorantly. And he endures the curse of suffering. As we watch him treading day after day the same round of ineffable torture, his misery pierces our very hearts. Was there ever such a life as his? such a path of sorrow? such a course of anguish? If, in the sense of its ulterior results, the sin is great, the suffering is also inconceivably severe. Here we see how Guilt and Destruction follow with immeasurable strides in the wake of Error. Iniquity works continually forward, phasis after phasis, towards prescribed issues. It first weaves cobwebs; then it forges fetters. The black and subtle crimes of Regan and Goneril, the sufferings of Kent, the death of Cordelia, the "unnaturalness between the child and the parent, death, dearth, dissolutions of ancient amities,"—in a word, all the multiplied

miseries of this mighty drama, have their ultimate well-heads in the blind arbitrary passion of the choleric old king, who, when he divided his kingdom and banished his favourite daughter from the realm, never dreamt of the horrors in which he is eventually entangled, and who, after all, is a man more sinned against than sinning.

Montague and Capulet, again, sin wilfully and wantonly. And upon their innocent posterity punishment descends like an heir-loom of misery. The divine Nemesis never remits though it may postpone the punishment. With bloody and irrevocable deeds these implacable enemies have laid up wrath against the day of wrath. And now the inevitable account-day has arrived at last. The fate-wave that has grown in volume with every fresh recurrence of those fearful feudatory brawls which are really fateful foreshadowings of retributive vengeance, drags down in a strong current of encompassing calamity the gentle and the just, and leaves the hoary-headed sinners balked, baffled, and bereaved. The iniquities of the fathers are thus visited upon the children. In a certain sense the sanguinary spirit of the old retaliatory legislation survives. Penalty is annexed to transgression even to the third and fourth generation. Romeo and Juliet become the unconscious organs or instruments of providential retribution: the healers and uniters and reconcilers of what is morally diseased, divided, and distracted. Montague and Capulet have long been slaves of Sin; now they are made slaves of Sorrow. The terrible immolation of those young creatures, who are so full of vivid faith and the strength and the gladness of living, is the only opening or avenue to atonement which the nature of the case provides—

> "See what a scourge is laid upon your hate,
> That Heaven finds means *to kill your joys with love.*"

Thus "Fate involves the melioration." Only Love, the ruling and co-ordinating substance of morality, can cast out hate or fear.

And what more painful picture of mysterious isolation and world-sorrow, what more bitter protracted soul-shattering death-agony can be imagined than that which Hamlet's history presents? What great antique "romance of scepticism" can compare with

it? Surely we have here a symbol of divine Humanity oppressed by mystery and mourning; an elemental and primeval creature living as the spirit moves him; a Prometheus Vinctus of a man, marked by trial, embittered by privation, darkened by "false fortune's frown," who practises a patient and majestic opposition to the tyranny of force and fraud and fear—the victim not of suffering only, but of cruel oppression and foul injustice! Like the protagonist of Shelley's sublime choral drama, Hamlet is the humane vindicator of love, of justice, and of liberty. He is engaged in a moral conflict with adverse powers of nature. He would penetrate the world with the whole life-force of his own pure, fervid, incomparable nature. But sin, slavery, Hell itself, conspire against his peace. No sacrifice, no abnegation can clear him from entanglement. Sin sticks fast in his soul like a barbed arrow; and Doubt gnaws like a vulture at his sensitive heart-strings. Darkness envelops his life, and wide-devouring ruin yawns everywhere around him. Bottomless pits of wickedness open at every turn; and Eternity sits like a gaping abyss at his feet.

Confounded, heart-struck, paralysed by trouble, bound in worse than adamantine bonds to his own eagle-baffling world-promontory of pain and passion, Hamlet, motionless and mournful, stands gazing with wild dismay into that terrible gulf, unlighted by any star, which a mother's sin and an uncle's treachery have opened up to view. Calamity maims and mars the godlike freshness of his youth. Brutal force and tyrannous strength repress the natural benevolence of his will. Crime blasts his ideals and blights his hopes. It is useless for him to brave the beating of the pitiless storm of malice that assails him. For the hand of an irreversible fate is upon him. He suffers from fraud. He dies by it. He puts his foot upon the serpent-head of evil; but the fang goes into his heel! The traitor gets the better of this man of vulnerable flesh, and death triumphs in the end. Can you find any character in the tragedy of antiquity who more definitely displays the ascendancy of the soul and the sovereignty of fate, or more visibly connects sin with sorrow in his own person, than the heroic, high-aspiring Hamlet of our poet, who rebels against the horrors

and the hindrances of a wicked world, and is at last crushed in the sultry strife by the invincible might of Necessity?

IX.

But what of the completeness of the victory achieved over sin and death? When Shakespeare comes to the end of a tragedy, he exhibits, as we have seen, none of the narrowness of sentimental faith. He has looked long and stoutly into the world. He has wrested from it some of its deepest meanings. He has sounded the secrets of sorrow, felt the infectious dragon-breath of evil, contemplated the merciless and mysterious forces of natural law. Like Pascal, like Milton, his mind has "beaten her wings against the prison-walls of human thought." And the immediate result of all his studies and contemplations is the discovery of the stern Biblical fact that sorrow is always coherently and irrevocably allied with sin; that blindness and ignorance, ancestral fault or folly, brutish instincts and tyrannous strength, are the dread causes of ruin and of death. These are the "crooked hands" of the world, of which Dante speaks, which pluck back the feet of men and women in the path, and "pierce while they hold." These are the lurking ugly things that drag down in a common ruin the innocent and the guilty.

Thus we have Juliet and Desdemona and Cordelia, Romeo and Othello and Hamlet—beings who exhibit a high moral resolve, a solemn patience, a purposed self-sacrifice—mixed up with the evil in their death. But, as I attempted to show in a preceding chapter, there is an ideal necessity for all this. Such a condition of affairs does not result from a faulty judgment or a fainting will. A sense of ultimate justice softens the most tragic issues. Shakespeare does not ask you to believe that life is wholly made up of dark hours and crooked passages, of casual retributions and dark endings: a thing of shreds and patches that avails nothing, effects nothing, promises nothing. He has strenuously striven with evil: he has even learned how to subdue it; and for our guidance has set simple bars at least between right and wrong. In silence and

in certainty he gradually and unequivocally establishes a standard of good and ill; and he points you to *that* as the solution and consolation of all sorrow and suffering. And at the end he invariably throws out a hint which tends to transport us beyond the ignorant present, and make us feel the future in the instant.[1] His ethical forecasts, in other words, are not made by explicit statement, but by his magnificent equity of judgment, behind which his religion lies occult.[2]

Therefore, despite the gloom and grief, he always rises in the end into conceptions of victorious and consummated beauty. Death is the inevitable accident of all human life: God's deepest, saddest, most disturbing mystery; but not the be-all and end-all. Hope, relief, and triumph are the realisable ideals of Shakespeare's art. Duty, justice, the fair and holy rule of life—these things are not finally presented as objects of anxious unsuccessful search, but as realities that are well ascertained and gladly accepted. Edgar may fall to misery, but not to baseness. Desdemona may sink to sleep, but not to shame. Gloucester may be blinded, but the keen and arrowy radiations of his anguish lead him towards the truth: a vision of divine providence possesses his soul; peace works through the pain; and before the end comes he "shakes patiently his great affliction off." Juliet may give her glorious body to the grave to be wasted by the worm, but her righteous conscience will remain pure and bright in sorrowful obedience to the end. Fate may oppress the holy spirit of Cordelia, but it cannot destroy it. She cannot rid herself of death; but, realising the angelical idea of humanity, she can transfigurate and triumph over it. There *is* a Beyond for Love! The "weary weight of all this unintelligible world" may cruelly crush and crack the noble heart of Hamlet; but with a half-defiant, half-trustful endurance of destiny he will preserve his integrity in its unstained radiance and strength.

> "I know—is all the mourner saith,
> Knowledge by suffering entereth;
> And Life is perfected by Death."[3]

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[1] See "Macbeth," Act i. sc. 5. [2] See Ruskin, 'Mod. Painters,' v. 231.
[3] Mrs Browning, "A Vision of Poets." Cf. "Hamlet," v. 2, 347.

Amidst all these troubled and fearful things Shakespeare's characters almost invariably attain that peace of mind which enables them either to live calmly or to die hopefully. Now you have a Cordelia with her simplicity and austerity and solid sweetness, her all-sustaining stoical ethics of vicarious endurance and self-surrender; and again a patient and saintly Katharine with her dignified submission and sense of duty—a "soul by resignation sanctified" in whom we find all the effectual faith, hope, and charity of the Christian Ideal. The true and solid worth of these two has been sorely tried and fully proved. Think you then that they attain, through rigorous self-subordination and strenuous devotion to pure ideals and pious recognition of eternal laws, no real and lasting victory over sin and death?

And this, remember, is not an accidental or episodical result, but an essential characteristic of his entire art method. The ultimate triumph of the truths of conscience and of conduct is faithfully if sometimes faintly foreshadowed in every play of the series. In "Othello" the betraying and accusing powers of earth and hell shrink back dumb and dismayed. The conflict that raged in "Romeo and Juliet" gives place to the calm assurance of love's victory and the perpetuity of peace. In "King Lear" the malignant and opposing forces withdraw to their congenial darkness, and the deities of light are in the ascendant. In "Macbeth" the mysterious horror that enshrouded life, chilling the anxious heart and shaking with untimely tremors the feeble frame, is lifted and dispelled. In "Hamlet" the hero eventually rises above his constitutional inertia, so that he is able to strike a blow for freedom and display that truest and purest morality which makes no compromise with evil. As Æschylus in the third part of his great trilogy disentangles the knot that binds the tragic story and releases Orestes on the Hill of Mars from the pursuing and god-missioned Furies, even so Shakespeare delivers Hamlet from disease of will, presents him as the efficient instrument of divine retribution, and causes him, with the last lifting of his hand and the last raising of his voice, to save at one moment and by one supreme effort of self-mastery his friend from death and his country from disaster. He triumphs over sin, for, like Orestes at the

bidding of Apollo, Hamlet, inspired and moved by the deathless spirit of buried Denmark, "slays the slayers." And he vanquishes death itself by pity and forgiveness of injuries and the hope that lies hid in "the readiness is all." Even in "Timon of Athens"—the most miserable play of the whole series—the suffering that seemed hopeless, reliefless, and eternal is at last subdued into a majestic sorrow which hides deep meanings under it. Even here goodness is vindicated and wrong avenged. In every instance Shakespeare causes his noble characters to pass from contention with evil into magnificence of rest. In every play he diffuses a strong, searching, pre-eminently Christian light over the deep abysses of human thought and over the "awful tides of human circumstance."

X.

Doubtless there are critics with whom this evidence would weigh lightly enough. For an earnest and eager demand is often made for a more direct and intelligible revelation of the poet's faith. Even those who are most willing to accept Shakespeare's ethical teaching as sound and serviceable, object that at best the ultimate fate and felicity of those beings who are most obviously steeped in the efficacy of the Christian ideal is in general overshadowed by an ominous "perhaps." There is a want of directness, they affirm, in the religious tone and temper of these plays: a habit of mournful analytical introspection, or semi-triumphant *re*trospection, which is essentially Pagan in character; a dubious shrinking from the deep and dazzling darkness of the shadow-land which extends beyond the limits of this life. They have no particular religion, it is asserted; they have little or nothing to say about the spiritual life of man: they ignore, in effect, the Soul with its immortal features, and deal only with mortal sorrow and with mortal victory.

In other words, they not only complain that a Shakespeare play is frequently terminated by a strange, mysterious, and almost contradictory crisis; but that it is never irradiated by gleams or stirred by breezes from a remoter life. For instance, Mr Ruskin,

who, strange to say, sees all the forms of Nature with the *eruditus oculus*, and yet never penetrates very far into the ultimate significance of the works of her greatest poet, has in several of his books countenanced this view. Take as a specimen these two sentences from the fifth volume of 'Modern Painters,' in which he institutes a comparison between the Classical and the Romantic drama altogether favourable to the former. "At the close of a Shakespeare tragedy," he says, "nothing remains but dead march and clothes of burial. At the close of a Greek tragedy there are far-off sounds of a divine triumph, and a glory as of resurrection." It would, I think, be difficult to discover in the works of any other Shakespearian critic so much error compressed within the narrow limits of eight-and-thirty words.

The reader will at once perceive that this opinion of Mr Ruskin implies and presupposes that the deepest tragedy ought to leave the impression on our minds that though sorrow and suffering may be long continued, joy and peace come in the end. And the question therefore is: Does Shakespeare, in the sense in which I am now writing, conform to this essential condition of tragic art? I do not hesitate to answer Yes. You invariably find in these tragedies a deep-rooted belief in the passing of all evil eventually into some great and enduring form of good. Throughout his stormy, complex, and checkered course man when raised above the thraldom of passion is sustained by the conviction that

> "The time will bring on summer,
> When briars shall have leaves as well as thorns,
> And be as sweet as sharp."

Or, in plain prose, as briars have sweetness with their prickles, so shall troubles be recompensed with joy. Shakespeare has not only a keen quick sympathy with things of sense and sight, but a deep full knowledge of the life by faith.

The last scene of "Romeo and Juliet," for instance, not only moves but soothes us. For it irresistibly carries forward our imagination from the horror of the Capulets' tomb to the better life of man.[1] Life is exalted by death. Love rises into greater

[1] See Dowden *ut supra*, 124.

activity and into purer uses. Capulet and Montague cease to be combatants and become creators. And the statues of pure gold which these reconciled rivals pledge themselves to raise in Verona in commemoration of the deathless and incorruptible passion of their ill-starred children, are designed by the poet to symbolise that strange alchemy of fate which, when the turmoil dies away and the surging of sense and passion ends, distils an enduring soul of goodness out of things that are called evil. Truth is thus bound up with Beauty. Nature speaks through Art of the eternal Good and True. And the heavenward-pointing memorial all gold that rises, as it were, Phœnix-like, out of the grave of the buried Love, eternises the beauty of pure youth, and symbolises the power of the untrammelled soul to rise through death to endless life.

When, again, Macbeth dies, the "time is free." The spirit of good is triumphant. The burdens of human life are suddenly removed; and a new era of peace and freedom and illimitable energy begins. And in "Hamlet" the doctrine of divine sovereignty is enforced with exceptional emphasis. A superhuman power presides over the mortal strife that is waged between blind, irregular, opposing forces. Through the baffled projects, the deep disjointed plots, and conflicting purposes of human agents, there is a divinity calmly working out its own beneficent purposes and shaping for good the destinies of men.[1] And thus when the Prince dies we are left with the hallowed impression that "flights of angels sing him to his rest."

In almost every instance indeed the jarring dissonances and discords of life eventually dissolve into far-off sounds of forgiveness and reconciliation, of moral victory and divine triumph. Out of the chaos of sorrow and from heart-crushing suffering there is called up the sweet and soothing image of peace. Out of all the storms and labyrinths of sin and corrupt misery of death there is at length evoked a divine vision of *palingenesis*, or restorative resurrection. Or in plainer speech there is an epoch of spiritual discovery lying remotely behind the poet's art.

Shakespeare would have us understand that the basis of this

[1] See Hudson, 'Life, Art, and Characters of Shakespeare,' ii. 262.

bewildering enigmatic nature of ours is not really stoicism and despair but love and hope. Although in general he leaves it unexpressed—for his are "the silent thoughts that *search* for steadfast light"; his is the sternly quiet, the unbigoted, yet intensely convincing philosophic faith in those intuitions of the soul that "sting with hunger for full light," and deeply tell of eternal life —he obviously intends that the spectator should feel in all its fulness the spirit of trust in God and the hope in Futurity. In these tragedies Shakespeare's theism carries with it the power of an endless life without dogmatic mention. But there is at least one instance in which he breaks through this natural reserve; and, representing his characters as ascending from surmise to assurance, explains through them and in no measured terms the true solution and consolation of all human sorrow. In the love-tragedy the good Laurence, reasoning in the calm and truthful spirit of Christian Philosophy, thus rebukes the impassioned grief and querulous complainings of the parents at Juliet's death :—

> "Heaven and yourself
> Had part in this fair maid; now heaven hath all,
> And all the better is it for the maid:
> Your part in her you could not keep from death,
> But heaven keeps his part in eternal life.
> The most you sought was her promotion;
> For 'twas your heaven she should be advanced:
> And weep ye now, seeing she is advanced
> Above the clouds, as high as heaven itself?
> O, in this love, you love your child so ill,
> That you run mad, seeing that she is well: . . .
> Dry up your tears, ...
> For though fond Nature bids us all lament,
> *Yet Nature's tears are Reason's merriment.*"
>
> —(iv. 5, 66-84.)

Here the last consecration of love is a divine faith which struggles with mortal pity: a sanctified resignation which triumphs over mortal pain.

XI.

In the preceding sections I have considered the ruling purpose and the terminal characteristics of this poetry. An attempt may now be made to reach the central and controlling ideas which exert a master-pressure upon Shakespeare's own spirit. And in order to do this it is not necessary that I should enter into any very lengthy analysis. A simple statement of my views may perhaps suffice.

From a study of these dramas I discover in the first place, then, that Shakespeare perceives the value of that ancient maxim which gives such a heavy burden of haunting spiritual terror to the great memorial tragedies of the Hebrews and the Greeks—"The doer of the deed must suffer." His majestic enunciation of this eternal truth is that which most closely connects him indeed as a poet-moralist with the great gnomic and prophetic writers of antiquity.

But side by side with this stern Æschylean doctrine, which is not a theological or Biblical proposition but simply an ethical and purely scientific one, I discover the consoling counterpart maxim —"Let the good prevail." In these we discover the ethic import, the master-thoughts, the motive-principle of all Shakespeare's art. These are the two great poetic imperatives or practical moral laws, so to speak, which explain the otherwise inexplicable severities of his method, and supply us with the solving clue to what of mystery is to be found in his Religion and Philosophy.

Doer of wrong must suffer! And this in a sense other than the popular or prevailing one. The question in this case is not simply, What have you done? It is much oftener, What have you left *undone?* The wrong-doing which is followed by inevitable retribution is quite as frequently accomplished by acts of omission as by deeds of commission. Shakespeare's theology is the stern theology of history. It therefore includes of necessity those fatalities which are consequent upon weakness or error or culpable mischance, as well as those more definite evils which spring directly from an innate and ineradicable hostility to goodness, or from overt and premeditated crime.

Pains and penalties do not exhaust their force on the conscious and calculating doers of guilty deeds who, like Nadab and Zimri and Baasha of old,[1] brave heaven and walk boldly in their sin. They strike down as remorselessly upon those well-intentioned but imprudent beings who through ethic apathy or constitutional defect, or sudden caprice of will, supply the means or provide the opportunities for the accomplishment of evil deeds. Men and women cannot follow their own will and pleasure without paying a penalty. Wherefore Cordelia must suffer for her imprudent silence, as we have already seen; Desdemona for her fiction and feebleness, arising from a sudden fear; and Ophelia for her half-conscious complicity in the treason and treachery of others,—since through these very things the deadly malignity of Regan and Iago and Claudius is strengthened, accelerated, made irreparable.

As in the veritable life of humanity so in Shakespeare's world of imagination, "unnatural deeds do breed unnatural troubles." A man reaps whatsoever he sows, even although, like Œdipus, he sows ignorantly and in error. It matters not that the deed is inflicted *on* him, rather than committed *by* him. In the one case as in the other the issues of wrong-doing are often incalculable, always irreversible: the doer of wrong must dree the dreadful doom of his erring disposition or his evil and unshunnable destiny. Shakespeare's picture and forecast of human life is drawn with scientific rigour, with definiteness, and with certitude. The doer of wrong must suffer. *Reperit Deus nocentem.* God finds out the guilty man, and our sins come home to us at last. This is the tyrannous fact from which escape is impossible. And yet the poet holds out to man a prospect of complete redemption from his misery.

Let the good prevail! This high and holy thought comes to us as a counterpoise or correlative of the idea which precedes it. But it communicates itself not by verbal emphasis but by influences too blessed and too potent for mere words to convey. The poet gently guides us to his meaning. He does not proclaim it with blare of trumpet. And the triumph he predicts is not accomplished by worldly prudence or cleverness, by strength

[1] See 1 Kings xv. 26 and 34; and xvi. 19.

of arm or force of will. His ideal types of masterful and victorious life are not Ulysses and Hector, but Imogen, Desdemona, and Cordelia, who exhibit in stressful times of temptation and trial the higher efficacies of Christian life, and the deeper workings of religious thought and emotion. He looks not to results but to efforts. Man's conquest over circumstance is not marked by the aggrandisement of the lower side of his nature through the restoration of wealth, although in the end Timon gets that; nor by the assuagement of mental and physical anguish, although at last Othello's heart is rescued from disloyalty, and pain dissolves in the perfect joy of reawakened trust; nor even by a reconciliation with the outward conditions of life and a physical triumph over human enemies, although Hamlet, roused and sustained by the Divine Helper, is able ere the poison quite o'ercrows his spirit to avenge the deed that wrecked his life. Shakespeare does not preach a degrading doctrine of worldly compensation like the rationalist. He accepts virtue as its own reward; and discovers in the victory of principle and good sense the highest possible triumph. Not hand-power but soul-power is that which really gives to man the mastery of the world which is the promised inheritance not of the strong but of the meek;—not of the Cæsars but the Marys of Humanity.

The author of 'Ecce Homo' has well said that "it is far from universally true that to get a thing you must aim at it. There are some things that can only be gained by renouncing them." Now this essentially Biblical idea works through the whole Shakespearian ethic. A man conquers the world by a renunciation of it, not in the ascetical but in the best Christian sense—not in the manner of Timon, who revolts from humanity, and in a fruitless fit of rage forswears the world; but in the sublime spirit of the votaress Isabella, who moves through Vienna like a thing "ensky'd and sainted"—*in* the world, not *of* it; and to whom a death of pain is less fearful than a life of shame.

With our poet it is also quite literally true that dissolution is the condition of renovation: that he who loses his life shall gain it. The grand and profound doctrine of "dying to re-live"—the unclothing of the soul in order that it may be more effectually

clothed upon—underlies all Shakespeare's thinking and teaching. Man triumphs not simply by refusing evil and choosing good, but by supreme anguish, by unmurmuring self-surrender and self-sacrifice, by rapturous renouncement of the world. He becomes victorious over sin and death by dying to re-live. Not simply in some Paradise such as presented itself to the rapt and holy vision of a John, a Dante, or a Milton; but in the ideal society of the future, like Romeo and Juliet, or in the eternal order which never dies, like Cordelia and Desdemona, who have enriched the tradition of goodness, and "strengthened the bonds of humanity." Like Œdipus at Colonus, the Lears and Cordelias, the Othellos and Desdemonas, with whom the parting sympathies of the poet of these plays appear to rest, arise mightier amid their misfortunes than in the days of their prosperity. These children of failure and sorrow are the true rulers of life: not the Edmunds and Regans and Iagos, who succeed in the worldly sense.

"For 'tis the eternal law
That first in beauty shall be first in might."

And does it really signify that sin is subdued at the expense of goodness? Has it ever been otherwise? That one shall suffer vicariously to deliver many is a rule of the universe. Better, according to Shakespeare, to weep over a dead than a dishonoured life. Law is sacred. But rebellion may also have something of sacredness in it. Better to die, then, as Othello dies than live as Iago lives. Better to lose all with Hamlet than gain a perishable part with Claudius. Better to sleep for ever with the meek-eyed Duncan than reign in shameless splendour with the proud usurper who has murdered sleep.

"Better we all were in our graves
Than live in slavery to slaves!"

Shakespeare does not indulge in day-dreams of perfectibility. Indeed in the "Tempest" he playfully satirises this pleasant theory of humanitarian enthusiasts in that description of the old counsellor Gonzalo's imaginary and kingless commonwealth. But he believes in the infinite capability for improvement in

human character and human destiny. With him failure is not irretrievable non-success; and the consequences of evil deeds are not universal and eternal. There is even in "King Lear" one sister who "redeems Nature from the general curse" which twain have brought her to. There is sin, sorrow, and slaughter, it is true. But there is also endurance and courage and power to overcome. In time the traces of wrong are effaced, or covered over by a flood of blessing. If sinners receive "the cup of their deservings," saints also get "the wages of their virtue."[1] If men indulge in sinister imaginings of death, they have also an assured belief in immortality which refreshes, sustains, uplifts the spirit. This is the sense, the highest of all, in which, according to the devout optimism of Shakespeare, the good in the end prevail.

XII.

In the manifold working out of these two principles, which contain the kernel and quintessence of his ethical philosophy, you may discover two salient characteristics in the intellectual life of our poet. In the first place, he manifests an invincible devotion to the good and the true. In the second place, he believes in that eternal truth to which certain scientists of the Victorian age have given the distinctive title of the "survival of the fittest." So that the first ruling maxim, "the doer of wrong must suffer," really implies the establishment of right or truth or law and the vindication of goodness or beauty; whilst the second maxim, "let the good prevail," simply means that in the race of life and the struggle for existence the incapable or the unworthy shall fail, dwindle away, and perish; and that the tougher fibre, the robuster will, the subtler, more efficient, and resourceful nature—in a word, all that is morally and volitionally most vigorous, all that is fittest for the exigencies of the hour, or best adapted to the specified conditions of human life—shall survive to carry on the advancement of humanity. It is in this way that we have created in all of these dramas an artistic and ethical

[1] See "King Lear," last scene.

unity which ultimately leaves the mind in an atmosphere at once severe and tranquil.

Shakespeare's absorbing and invincible interest in moral and psychological truth displays itself at every turn. With him the triumph of a principle is of more account than the preservation of a life. Conduct and obedience, and the power to see things as they really are—these are the conspicuous and uppermost ideas of his art. With regard to his characters, he seems to feel something of what Homer makes Jupiter express with regard to the Trojans—"They interest me, though they must needs perish." The cry for judgment and justice is never silenced. He gives due emphasis to the most "blessed conditions" of Desdemona; but he does not conceal the peccant part in her nature. At the spur of fear she momentarily swerves from the path of rectitude; and for that she must suffer. Nemesis attends the weak as well as the wicked. In like manner Cordelia, with all her severe and stoic elevation of character, is tempted into temporary undutifulness. From her excessive addiction to reticence of feeling all the terrible tragic results of the story proceed. She illustrates and enforces the great truth that even moral restraint, if carried to the extreme of suppressing any of the noble affections which belong to human nature, is inevitably followed by a Nemesis whom penitence does not appease. Ophelia, again, may with propriety be regarded as in the main an innocent victim. Yet the fate that meets her is not unmixed with guilt. And although Hamlet must be accepted as the heaven-appointed avenger of others' wrong-doing, he must also be looked upon as the punitive executor of Fate in respect of faults that are self-generated and self-nourished. Even here we have no futile sacrifice of one for the sin of another. His *own* ruined nature demands a victim. He, too, is met by an avenging justice in his own person.[1]

One is of course at times strongly disposed to think that poetic justice appears too severe in these destinies. But the impression is at once rectified when one remembers that the true and prevailing theme of the Shakespearian tragedy is not so much the representation but the punishment of disordered desires which,

[1] See Gervinus, 'Commentaries,' 581.

through their excess, pass from virtues into vices. Man's sin and unsightliness (Edmund and Gloucester); his moral disease, which involves so much pain and demands so much expiation (Lear and Cordelia); his inward sense of ruin (Macbeth); his alienation from himself and his fellows (Timon), these are the things in the punishment of which we discover a direct and eloquent sermon in behalf of the Good and True. There is always an ideal necessity for what of sorrow and sacrifice and suffering is to be found here. And in every case the truth-and-beauty-purpose of the poet triumphs over the claims of taste, sensibility, and convenience.

And just think how admirably Shakespeare provides for the future good of the race: how he gives a counterpoise for all the past ills of life and all the dark facts which history can adduce. Here the baseness, stupidity, injustice, suffering, and ruin which have wrung our hearts are ultimately presented together as a splendid challenge to strength, wisdom, endurance, and faith. It is the Prince of Verona, the champion of law and order, who speaks the final word in "Romeo and Juliet." It is Edgar, the optimist and champion of right, who rises to the heights of sovereignty in "King Lear." It is the victorious Fortinbras, the champion of progress and reformation, and the representative of the future, to whom the hero in "Hamlet" gives his dying voice. It is Alcibiades, the champion of common-sense, the finest-fibred figure in the play, who ultimately exercises sway over the lascivious city in "Timon of Athens." And it is Macduff who survives the contest on the plain of Dunsinane in "Macbeth," and forecasts the crowning of young Malcolm at Scone—the marching of the king's heir to victory under a green bough.

These characters, to whom our hearts go out in fervent emotions of love and confidence, represent the strong, firm, self-possessed power of efficient action. They do not conquer fate or overpower necessity. They do something better. They rise above fate, or yield to it in such a way as to prove themselves wiser and better than conquerors. They are not prepared to give up life as a bad job like Timon, who is a terrible example of the truth that any transgression of the laws of nature, reason, or

common-sense, which involves the extinction of all feelings of affection, is not only antagonistic to the holiest instincts of humanity and the eternal ordinances of God, but provocative of self-blindness and despair. They refuse to look to another world for reward, compensation, happiness, like Claudio or Katharine. They have no knowledge of incurable evils and unshunnable destinies, like Lear and Othello. But, after the manner of Henry V.—the poet's favourite ideal character—they regard the rectification of existing wrong, and the immediate relief of prevailing wretchedness, as man's true use and function. They subdue evil into some form of goodness, and convert contrarieties into furtherances. What man has caused, man may likewise cure. This is the maxim which rules and sustains these active, efficient, high-hearted representatives of the Future.

The mixture and antithesis in this tragic view of life serves as an appetising quality to promote right thinking and right acting. The whole power and purpose of our poet seems to find expression indeed in that brief Hellenic message, compounded of sensibility and intelligence, which our own Keats re-formed—Beauty is truth; truth beauty. Truth, not quite possessed, but aimed at; Beauty, not altogether realised, but hoped for. In Shakespeare, as in Heine, the spirit of Greece and the spirit of Judæa are thus found in unison. By his perspicacity and pathos, his sense of form and measure, his love of beauty, he is Greek; by his intensity and sublimity, his strictness of conscience and love of truth, he is Hebrew. And thus it is that his dramas, which so vividly display the power of intellect and the stress of conscience, enrich the mind, refine the taste, and purify the passions of Humanity by a pity that is born of beauty, by a terror that is bred of truth.

The relevancy of these remarks, as an introduction to a detailed study of one of Shakespeare's great tragedies, will presently appear.

[redacted]



PART II.

THE TRAGEDY OF OTHELLO

"To be wise, and love,
Exceeds man's might."

—*Troilus and Cressida*, iii. 2, 162.

CHAPTER I.

THE ETHICS AND ÆSTHETICS OF THE TRAGEDY.

I.

AND now, after so long a preface,—a preface which some may think occupies a disproportionate space in my book, but which it seemed, to others besides myself, desirable to give, since it not only fixes the qualifications of whoever undertakes the critical study of a Shakespearian drama, but points out, for the benefit of the general reader, the primary aims of the poet, his artistic methods and habits of thought,—we arrive at the tragedy of "Othello."[1]

[1] The first and only quarto edition of "Othello" which appeared between 1616, the date of Shakespeare's death, and 1623, the year in which the First Folio appeared, was published in 1622 by Thomas Walkley, who entered it in the 'Stationers' Registers,' "under the hands of Sir George Buck and of the Wardens," October 6, 1621. Between the text of this edition and the text of the Folio, which came from an independent source, there are many differences in matters of detail, which Mr Furnivall has noticed in his admirable Introduction to the 'Leopold Shakespeare,' p. lxxvii. *note* 3. The Quarto, on the one hand—and this perhaps is the chief point in which these two copies differ—has a few lines that are wanting in the Folio; whilst the latter, on the other hand, has a number of passages, amounting in all to about 160 lines, which are omitted in the former. Except by internal evidence we have no means of determining the date at which the play was composed. Until recently it was commonly supposed, upon the strength of a passage in Act iii. scene 4, where the Moor says to Desdemona—

> "A liberal hand: the hearts of old gave hands
> But our new heraldry is hands, not hearts,"—

that the tragedy could not have been composed prior to the year 1611, at which

Of all his serious dramas, this, on the whole, is the one which, having regard to its intrinsic qualities, the ethical difficulties of its painful plot, the wonderful psychological insight which it displays, and the deep interest which it shows in moral truth, best illustrates the measure of Shakespeare's many-sided genius. To my mind the tragedy of "Othello," which is plausibly conjectured to have been composed when the poet was in his fortieth year, after he had passed through his period of apprenticeship and had become a master-dramatist, practical, well-rounded, fully equipped, is the highest specimen we possess of what is appropriately designated the Gothic Drama, which it is always well to remember was an instinctive, spontaneous, and self-determined "outgrowth from the Gothic mind under Christian culture." Its absolute

time King James instituted the new order of Baronets, whose armorial bearings included the figure of a bloody hand, to which it was thought the lines quoted obliquely referred. But the general character and spirit of the play are in opposition to this theory; whilst the metrical tests, in the opinion of those most competent to judge in such matters, show almost conclusively that it cannot possibly belong to the same period of Shakespeare's art-life as "The Tempest," "Cymbeline," and "The Winter's Tale." Professor Dowden ('Shakespeare Primer,' 131) concludes that it is "one of the group of tragedies of passion which includes 'Macbeth' and 'Lear'"; and Professor Delius, of Bonn, whose conjectural chronological order of the plays is now accepted by most critics, has given the year 1604 as a not improbable date for "Othello." The original story — "Il Moro di Venezia" — is to be found in the 7th Novel of Decade III., November 7, of Giraldi Cinthio's collection of tales entitled 'Hecatommithi'—translated in 1795 by W. Parr and reprinted in Hazlitt's 'Shakespeare's Library,' Pt. I., ii. 285-308—"a very poor and ill-constructed composition," the form and matter of which the dramatist recreated and transfigured. Three other points may here be noticed: (1) The incident of an intended attack on Cyprus by the Turks was probably suggested by the historical fact that in 1570 such an assault was actually made; (2) In 'Notes and Queries'—1885—Mr Ross O'Connell states that a letter written in 1602 mentions "a Desdemona in the flesh" at Venice who had been murdered by her husband in a fit of jealousy which the people believed to be without cause (which confirms the earlier opinion of W. W. Lloyd in his 'Critical Essays,' p. 454, that the writer of the Italian novel worked up in his romance the particulars of some contemporary atrocity); and the writer suggests that this crime would be known to the Venetian Ambassador in London, and that Shakespeare may have heard of it indirectly through him; (3) According to a remark in Jordan's 'Royal Arbor of Loyal Poesie,' it appears that in 1663 an English actress first appeared on the stage in "Othello."—See 'Athenæum,' 1857, i. 439.

and sovereign perfection is such that it gives one the impression, strengthened and confirmed by every fresh perusal of the play, that the mind which could conceive and accumulate such vast and varied wealth of character, passion, pathos, poetry, and high philosophy, and, with such freedom and self-possession, give united and harmonious expression to things so diversified in form, in aspect, and in purpose, was equal to any achievement within the compass of human thought.

Not only has "Othello" proved to be one of the most popular and successful of all the tragedies of Shakespeare on the stage since the days of Burbage and Betterton and Garrick to those of Kemble and Kean, or Booth and Salvini and Irving, with whose performances we are all familiar,—a circumstance which is due no doubt to the great intrinsic interest of the story, to the economy of its *dramatis personæ* (for it can be performed by about a dozen speaking actors), and to the absence of any obscurity or involvement in the action through the introduction of a secondary or subordinate plot, such as we have in "King Lear"; but no play of his, with the single exception, perhaps, of "Hamlet," has given rise to a greater variety of conflicting interpretations; and certainly no tragedy of his has been criticised with such distinguishing preference by commentators of every school and nation, from Johnson and Gervinus to Coleridge and Schlegel, from Guizot and Dyce to Mézières and Swinburne.

The largeness of its conception and the variety of its details; the judicious management of its plot and the skilful distribution of its several parts; the compact pith and limberness of its diction and the almost flawless perfection of its flexible and pure-flowing rhythm; the breadth and boldness of its characterisation, and the remarkable justice which is done to what Goethe would have called the *architectonics* of the drama,—these are the elements which have given to "Othello" a certain artistic eminency in the long list of Shakespeare's productions, and placed it among the finest stage-plays of the world. And when I remember the conditions under which he receives and treats the subject of this drama, the quality of the circumstances introduced into it, the almost unbroken intensity of gloom by which its last scenes are

distinguished, the terrible climax that it reaches, and the weighty moral lesson that it conveys, I do not hesitate to speak of it here as first in ethical importance and in all the proper tokens of dramatic power of all the plays that belong to the great tragic period of Shakespeare's art-life. English literature, indeed, has nothing else like it; and the art and literature of no other country possesses so unique a product. The best dramas of Calderon, Corneille, Alfieri, Schiller, seem tame and stiff and mechanical when compared with "Othello," with its beautiful and bewildering scenes of ardour and of agony, its heartrending explosions of volcanic passion, its tumultuous vehemence of tragic action, its moving and melting pathos, its genuine fire of inspiration. And this, I venture to think, is a judgment from which most readers will be less inclined to dissent the older they grow and the deeper their study of Romantic Drama becomes.

II.

It is further to be noted that whilst Shakespeare at first accommodates his language to the traditional forms of harmony—you have examples of this in "Romeo and Juliet," his tentative attempt at tragedy (1591-1593), and in the early comedies and histories (1588-1595)—he ignores the reigning conventions, and innovates upon the example of his precursors in the exact structure of his versification when, entering in 1602 as a master-dramatist the supreme department of his craft, he produces that great series of ideal tragedies of which "Hamlet" and "Othello," according to the commonly received chronology, are the first in date. Conscious that his powers are undeveloped, Shakespeare commences his career as dramatic poet by rehandling or recasting the feeble productions of older playwrights, which are remarkable for their incoherence of design, their superfluity of incident, their extravagance in the delineation of character. He makes experiments in comedy, in history, even in farce; manifests the same rapidity of execution, the same excess of fancy, the same inventive waywardness; and, in a word, imitates the prevailing theatrical style of

the period which, as every one knows, is disfigured by much fantastic passion and wordy melody and superfluous rhetoric, albeit these pre-Shakespearian dramas, whilst lacking artistic modulation and gradation, have occasionally something of that vigorous conception and masterly reading of the inmost depths of human character which forms the peculiar distinction of Shakespeare's maturest work.

But when the facts of the world lay hold of our poet's mind and his spirit passes under the influence of a higher law, when he gains experience and practice in his art, he rids himself of those extravagances and faults of style which so fatally mar his tentative efforts in comedy and history, such as "Love's Labour's Lost" and the First Part of "King Henry the Sixth"; and which he had derived from contemporary playwrights who themselves were imitators and disciples of the elder master Christopher Marlowe, whose superb genius, unrestrained by judgment and good sense from eccentric impulse and defiant self-assertion—native qualities that often remind one of Dante and Michel Angelo, who may be said to be over-inflated by their expansive egoism—gave itself up to blocking out titanic and rough-hewn figures and idealising passions on a gigantic and superhuman scale. He discards rhyme, the earlier metre of the romantic drama; adopts blank-verse, which Marlowe,—the father and founder of the English stage, the Palestrina of dramatic art, to whom we owe our modern melody,—had discovered and used to blow the trumpet-blasts of "Tamburlaine," as the proper formal vehicle of dramatic expression, the supreme instrument of tragic poetry; and, passing from dependent to independent art, brings the type established by his predecessors to artistic ripeness. He becomes less imitative and more idiomatic, and no longer indulges in the pomp and grandiosity of his turbid and turgid models. He adopts a free and daring method of his own, which sacrifices all rule to salience of presentation; and gradually disciplines his genius into such exhibitions of grace and power as "Hamlet" and "Othello," "Macbeth" and "King Lear," which surpass all precedent efforts in the domain of dramatic art in majestic elevation of thought, in nervous severity of phrase, in equable and blameless melody, in boldness and

opulence and Homeric freshness of imagery. In these dramas he shows, not the uncertainties of a man feeling his way, but the energy of a reliant innovator who begins to reveal himself.

Although Shakespeare's language is by no means of a constant and uniform grain, his choice of words, his method of sentence-building, his cast and texture of imagery—in a word, all that is included in his diction and harmony, or his mode of communicating through his dramatic personages his particular thoughts—is substantially the same in all of those imperishable masterpieces which cluster round the years 1603-1608, and whose form of imagery and pitch of rhythm are, beyond any other known organs or instruments of human thought, capable of voicing in all fitting accents or bodying forth in sympathetic words and phrases every possible tone of mind or of feeling.[1] So far, then, there is probably little or nothing to differentiate "Hamlet" from "Macbeth," or "King Lear" from "Othello." All these dramas are rich, attractive, divinely strong; remarkable for that sonorous amplitude of style and that quality of earnest and austere dignity which are so peculiarly fitted not only to persuade the feelings but to convince the reason.

It is not in style or *technique* or artistic organisation and dramatic structure, therefore, that the immense superiority of "Othello" appears when contrasted with the three plays with which it is commonly associated. I fully recognise the general merits,—the largeness of manner, the depth of thought, the music of utterance, the intensity and fire of imagination,—of all of the fore-cited tragedies, which are undeniably written in Shakespeare's highest style and in the maturity of his powers, and faithfully reflect the faculties and forces of his "oceanic mind." I am even prepared to admit that "Hamlet" surpasses our drama in compass and reach of pure thought, in keen and brilliant logical analysis, in polished and incisive criticism of human purposes and human destiny; that, notwithstanding that "Othello" is the tragedy which, on the whole, retains, as I have hinted, most vitality for modern audiences, "Macbeth," and not "Othello," is in reality the poet's best acting drama, the one in which he not only dis-

[1] See Hudson *ut supra*, i. 189-191; also ii. 353.

plays most understanding with respect to stage management,[1] but the one in which he most clearly evinces his marvellous power of enchanting and disenchanting us by means of supernatural machineries; and that "King Lear," although by no means the very greatest of his achievements as an intellectual whole, is yet the greatest as regards scenical grandeur, and, of all English tragedies, as Shelley rightly points out in his 'Defence of Poetry,' the one which makes the nearest approach to the Grecian model. And yet, having made these allowances, I still venture to affirm that the "Othello" rises above these "Hamlets" and "Macbeths" and "Lears" as the huge, heaven-piercing Lammergeyers soar in solitary and proud pre-eminence above the loftiest Alpine peaks.

In reading "Othello" one has not only a feeling of vastness and spaciousness, of stupendous unity and almost endless variety, such as no other poet gives; but such as even Shakespeare himself, with all his athletic imagination and fertility of resource, never gives us in any other drama—not even in "King Lear," which Professor Dowden, however,—one of the most competent and careful of our poet's critics,—asserts is the greatest single achievement in poetry of the Teutonic or northern genius. In no other drama does Shakespeare take a more strenuous and single-handed grasp of character and the permanent facts of society, or treat with such equal and unfaltering vigour the actual and ever-recurring circumstances of ordinary domestic life, or lay bare with such vividness and force of presentation far-reaching principles that stimulate thought and challenge meditation, and define and encourage those vacillating perceptions of duty which produce in our common human nature, that is for ever fluctuating between vice and virtue, such strong emotions of desire and distress.

It may be said of "Hamlet," the longest and in some respects the most obscure drama in the whole canon of Shakespeare's plays, as it is certainly one of the profoundest and most sympathetic of his psychological studies—for I am old-fashioned enough to believe that the character of the moody and meditative Prince sprang

[1] Goethe's opinion: see 'Conversations with Eckermann,' December 25, 1825.

into being out of the poet's own keen sympathy with an individual soul suffering under that moral disease to which the Germans have given the name of *Weltschmerz* or world-sorrow, and his affectionate interest in the personal troubles and dangers of a distinguished contemporary—probably the young Earl of Essex, who is well known to have been one of our poet's earliest patrons and protectors, and one of the chief fautors of the Elizabethan stage—that it requires for its perfect comprehension a peculiar habit of mind or a course of special study. It is pre-eminently a tragedy of thought; a subtle weft of ideas, rather than of words; a vast concretion of beautiful symbols, every one of which has a sort of double-shotted meaning. Hence it always taxes to the utmost even the highest powers of the student and metaphysician, whose minds invariably get bewildered when they attempt to thread its intricacies or "pluck out the heart of its mystery"; and it becomes "caviare to the general" more frequently than any other Shakespearian drama, unless, as sometimes happens, its incidents and events, through the misdirected zeal of unintelligent players, are made subservient to the vulgar ends of melodrama.

But "Othello" appeals directly to the understanding and experience of all ordinary mortals. Even the inapt and uncultured can easily comprehend it. For it is rooted on the solid rock of our common sympathies. It is true to the great aboriginal instincts of our nature; severely faithful to its foibles and follies; and, in a supreme manner, responsive to the emotional wants, the mixed aspirations, the passionate self-consciousness of humanity in every age. Many fail to appreciate the metaphysical monologues of Hamlet, his hereditary Berserker rage, his "wild and whirling words," and all the perplexing peculiarities of his idiosyncrasy; or the witchcraft language and machinery that create disharmony in the nature of Macbeth; or the galling and unbearable and improbable horrors which result in the decay and dilapidation and ultimate destruction of Lear's mind and manhood. But every one is thrilled by the natural life and passion, the heartbreak and anguish, of Othello. These things are depicted with such exquisite simplicity, with such realistic verisimilitude, that they command the sympathies and suffrages of all.

Our drama never becomes incoherent, like "Hamlet"; never grows confused by the rush and redundancy of an excited and overstrained imagination, like "Macbeth"; never becomes revolting by the exhibition of horrors incredibly fantastic and unnatural, like "Lear," where, in the frightful scene of tearing out Gloucester's eyes, that sombre dramatic terror which belongs essentially to tragedy, and which we discover in the "Othello," passes over into the horrible and barbarous, as in the gross and bloody tragedies of Marston and Webster and Tourneur, whose debased art reminds one of the "Laocoon" or "The Rape of the Sabines," with their painful and hideously distorted figures crushed and convulsed in the coils of the serpent, or twisting and gasping and struggling in extremities of suffering in the cruel hands of demoniac ravishers. All through "Othello," in the varied action of which there is a strange and subtle interfusion of tragic strife and lyrical sweetness, we feel, as in the perfect symphonies of Beethoven, a great informing spirit whose teachings we can trust implicitly, a divine controlling reason that conducts us safely through all the changeful phases of a mighty grief, with its complex and subtle emotions of the heart and its terrible crescendoes of accumulated passion; through all its wild romance, its terror and sadness, and all its novelties of means and purpose. Here Shakespeare presents, with minute fidelity, an immense crowd of feelings with something like a symphonic unity of effect which, touching the most hidden springs of emotion, kindles and feeds within us a delicate concert of thought and feeling, and stirs up the finest and most wholesome inspirations of fear and faith. The whole elements of the tragedy are harmonised to a full and natural close like music.

There is indubitably degradation in this drama. But there is likewise much divine beauty. There is, it is true, passionate and despairing sin. But it is counterpoised by calmness and victory. There is a potent and imperious demi-devil; but there is also a "heavenly innocent," whose angel-sweetness all his malign activity of evil cannot taint, whose "blessed conditions" he cannot bend or subdue to his purpose. There assuredly lurks in the action a great blur of human depravity; but in the end, as we shall see, the thought of sin fades out before a dream of divine purity and

peace. Thus the "Othello" is natural and exceptionally regular; wrought to the full length and limit of its subject-matter, and no further. It is many-sided without being unbalanced or overweighted by thought, highly romantic without being improbable, tender without showing weakness, passionate without being incoherent, forcible without ever losing the fine sense of proportion. From the wooing softness of its dawn to the lurid splendour of its sunset, we not only lose nothing of the essential greatness and mystery of Nature in "Othello," but we find in it the entire fulness, the self-consistency, the self-completeness of perfect Art, and discover nearly all the materials that are necessary for tracing the development of the poet's genius and for understanding the aims and purposes of his drama. In a word, it would be impossible to improve upon it without fatally marring the morality as well as the artistic beauty of the work. Nothing could be more living and picturesque, more just and intelligible.

III.

According to the theory of this criticism, then, "Othello," from its unity of design and action, its breadth and variety of characterisation, its ethic sovereignty, stands an unparagoned masterpiece of poetic art, the most sublime and finished conception of Shakespeare's muse. And this theory, I am glad to know, is supported and sustained by the opinion of the best authorities. Hunter, for instance, affirms with pardonable enthusiasm that the design of the piece is "such as Melpomene might be proud to own." And Coleridge,—than whose work nothing in the whole apologetics of Shakespearology displays more labour, keen-sightedness, and acumen,—whilst contrasting "Othello" with "Hamlet" and "King Lear," maintains that whilst in the latter there is something gigantic and unformed, everything in the former "assumes its due place and proportion, and the whole mature powers of the author's mind are displayed in admirable equilibrium." Gervinus again, still looking at its purely æsthetic merit, asserts that it affords the most perfect satisfaction to all the

great demands of tragedy; and Hudson emphatically calls it "*the best organised play*" of this great series; whilst, in respect of the single element of tragic passion alone, Ulrici and Lloyd, Swinburne, Furnivall, and many others, claim for it an absolute and sovereign perfection amongst *all* the dramas of our poet. And one only requires, I think, to study the third Act of "Othello,"—in my opinion the most powerful effort which Shakespeare has ever achieved,—to feel the force and truth of such deliverances.

But apart from such critical judgments, no one of ordinary sensibility, I think, can fail to perceive, after a tolerably profound study of our drama, that it obeys all the essential laws and principles of true art, that it fully meets and satisfies all the high and varied demands of tragedy, and that, as an exquisite harmony of vision and expression, it is shaped with due persistence and perfection from the beginning of its story to the end. No intelligent person can fail to be impressed by its *solidarity*, by which is meant the mutual sympathy and intelligence of its several parts; or by the *originality* of the methods and processes by which—although following, as we have seen, the general outline of the Italian fable of Cinthio—it gradually develops from an internal principle of growth into a great and harmonious organic structure. Nor can one fail to see the artistic *completeness* of the piece, which expresses fully and clearly its *own* meaning without foreign help or the intervention of latter-day commentators; or yet its *disinterestedness*, by which again is meant the impartial manner in which the truth of nature in all its solidity and sternness is seized by the poet and reproduced, without surplus or deficiency, in his drama. For truth, or fidelity to fact—the beginning and end of all morality—is here obviously the all-in-all of the artist's purpose. These things, which I assume are the essential prerequisites to all true excellence in dramatic art, are found operating in "Othello," keeping all its parts true to the terms and relations of organic unity, and knitting them together in a harmonious and consistent whole.[1] The sense, intellect, and heart move together in perfect sympathy and unison.

[1] See Hudson *ut supra*, i. 139-146.

IV.

But it is to be remembered that the motive is everything, and the form comparatively nothing. Shakespeare did not prefer the external form to the inward substance of poetry. The persistence with which for so long a time he kept his genius enfettered or controlled by the bonds of rhymed verse, to which he was naturally addicted, although Marlowe had provided a diviner instrument for the purposes of the tragic poet, plainly proves this. And, therefore, when judging of this drama we must think of something more than mere inventive perception and beauty of form and blamelessness of melody. We must manifest some regard for the higher æsthetic feeling, or pure imaginative impulse which gives a moral value to the work. We must not leave untouched the great Art-problem of dramatic poetry—What is the *rationale* of its existence, and what the secret of its power over the soul?

Let it never be forgotten that the greatness of "Othello" does not rest entirely on the artistic perfection of the outward structure or organic form, on mere mechanical regularity, on delicacy of touch and smoothness of operation. It has a solid, genuine, substantive virtue of its own; a real and lasting beauty which is an emanation from a source that lies deeper than itself. In the final analysis you will discover that the historic verisimilitude of its delineations, its colour and music and harmonious rhythm of movement, its beautiful and broadly human conceptions, that are made immortal by strength of diction or exquisiteness of phrase, are as nothing when compared with the ethical elements of the tragedy which coalesce with the narrative, and live through the characters; that the artistic order and temperance and harmony of its several parts, so marvellously maintained through a manifold and diversified course of action, are as nothing when compared with that immanent spiritual life of things which it is the poet's delight to feel, and his most definite intention to utter in this drama, and without which indeed the utmost perfection of mere poetic form is worthless,—a thing fit only, at best, to beguile or

sustain the listless or indolent reader in the last languors of sensuous exhaustion. In "Othello" everything is subdued to the sternest spiritual requirements of Art, which Aristotle wisely defined as "the reason of the thing, without the matter." Without anything like ethical didacticism, the poet in this drama imparts the soundest and most manly moral instruction. Knowing all the temptations and fatalities that provoke the simple and unguarded life to sin, and all those graver tests and trials that assail and beleaguer the unwarned and irresolute soul in its solitary struggle with the world, he exerts throughout, yet undemonstratively, a pure, quick, and ardent moral influence that is calculated to warn, to support, and exalt mankind. This, the vital principle of the thing, since it tends to "free, arouse, dilate" us, is that which gives a permanent and pre-eminent interest to this stupendous passion-play. And once abstract the ethical element from "Othello," and there is immediately a total collapse of design, incidents, and characters. It claims our highest regard inasmuch as it purifies us with the terror and pity of a soul in its extremity: a simple and defenceless soul taken in the toils of craft, but suffering a retribution foredoomed in its own nature.

And hence you find that the greatest critics of our drama have always admired it for the purity of the ethical and religious principles which radiate through it, and not simply and solely for the unity of its design and action, and the balanced gravitation or closely linked sequence of its several parts. Dr Johnson, for example, does not hesitate to affirm that it "has more moral than almost *any* play." And Hazlitt declares that "the moral it conveys has a closer application to the concerns of human life than that of almost any other of *Shakespeare's* plays;" whilst Hudson, without any qualification whatever, pronounces it to be "the greatest of domestic dramas." Were it necessary to multiply instances of concurrent testimony, I could easily glean many similar passages from the pages of Gervinus, Ulrici, Coleridge, Schlegel, Guizot, and Dowden,—all of whom assert that its essential significance is ethical and spiritual. At every point in this perfectly constructed drama, moral principles are pressed home upon our hearts with unfaltering insistence. It seems to

me to absorb more of the moral elements of human life, to deal more directly with the moral perceptions and the moral will of man, and to bear down upon the conscience of the reader or spectator with more painful weight and tenacity, than any other play of this great series. It opens up to view more of the moral quality of the poet's own genius than either "Hamlet" or "Macbeth" or "King Lear"; and in the fullest and most perfect manner exhibits the natural and inalienable relation of his Poetry to Morality and to moral influence upon men. In fine, Shakespeare's whole art-faculty is here made subservient to the best interests of Humanity, of public virtue, and domestic piety.

Whether we view "Othello," then, in the light of its artistic virtue and the power which it possesses of relating to us the utmost ascertainable truth respecting things which are of primal moment to us, or in the light of its ethical righteousness and the power which it possesses of freeing and arousing and dilating our moral nature, and of determining the rightness of our own actions, it seems certain that this drama is entitled to stand foremost in the long list of our poet's productions. Indeed, to take even a wider range, I may say that in all the creations of genius which the world possesses there is nothing at all comparable to the absolute truth of this deep and dark vision of domestic life; nothing at all equal to it either as regards the impassioned unity of the whole in spite of the complex diversity of its parts, or as regards the sure grasp which the poet takes of certain primary ideas of life, religion, and morality, on which in all ages the safety, the honour, and the greatness of mankind depend. Under some such conviction as this the noble Landor, who seems to have felt to the uttermost depths of his sensitive soul the wide-sweeping underswell of its dark and accumulating misery, and who had in his own nature something of that volcanic temperament and blinding imagination through which the Moor of Venice, dashed into collision with inexorable facts, suffers shipwreck, says, with characteristic emphasis, in his imaginary conversation with the poet Southey, that "'Othello' is loftier than the citadel of *Troy;* and what a *Paradise* falls before him! Let

us descend; for from 'Othello' we *must* descend."[1] These words of one of our greatest critics of life and literature express my own unalterable conviction as to the greatness of our tragedy, and form a fitting pendant to what has been said on the subject in the preceding pages.

V.

But merely to marvel at the complex phenomena of Shakespeare's easy, plastic, unconfined imaginative genius, or merely to say of the "Othello" that it is the greatest play of its kind, the one in which the wide free elements of universal nature are reproduced with all the ease, harmony, completeness, and uncompromising truthfulness of creative art, stands for very little indeed. Eulogy is not criticism; and enthusiasm is not always a true sign of intellectual rectitude. Wherefore, in treating of this tragedy, which seems to touch the sublime sharp summit of human passion, it is essential that one should avoid everything like a slavish and undiscriminating homage, and set himself seriously to discover what it means, what it contains, and what it teaches.

According to a certain strain of criticism, which seems to have regard mainly to the deep and sustained passion of the piece, this tragedy is to be spoken of as one that is essentially of the erotic type. And that "Othello" is in a sense a love-tragedy no competent critic will ever think of disputing. For here—as truly, if not so fully, as in the exuberant love-song of "Romeo and Juliet," in which we have a perfect picture of innocent self-abandoned passion, clear of all reflection—we see represented, with surpassing felicity, the very essence and nature of human affection. But it is something more than an amatory poem, whose distinctive charm for the most part usually consists in sweetness and suavity of melody; in the overbearing grief or the overbearing ardour, the anguish and tumult, the drowsy languor or rapturous elevation consequent upon some mighty or mystical

[1] See 'Imaginary Conversations' (ed. 1868), ii. 157; also Mr Colvin's monograph on 'Landor' ("English Men of Letters" Series), chap. ix., 216.

or purely platonic passion, like that of Dante for Beatrice, or Petrarch for Laura, or Surrey for Geraldine, or Spenser for Rosalind, or Sidney for Stella. That which most tends, indeed, to popularise a play—what we commonly call the "love-interest"—is kept in "Othello" in a secondary place. In a certain sense the love-affairs of the drama have only a subordinate signification. Unlike many of the Comedies—for instance, "Love's Labour's Lost" and "The Two Gentlemen of Verona," or "A Midsummer Night's Dream" and "All's Well that Ends Well"—the love-adventures which are represented or described do not form the central point of interest.

Yet between "Romeo and Juliet" and "Othello" there are indubitably some striking points of coincidence and resemblance. For example, Juliet and Desdemona, both inexperienced girls of exalted sensibility, are equally impassioned and equally unreasonable. They feel in excess, and cannot but love passionately, even recklessly. The passion of Romeo and Othello for Juliet and Desdemona, like the passion of Catullus for Lesbia, seems, again, at certain stages to be little short of lunacy. And as the mutual passion of the guileless star-crossed lovers of Verona is sudden, swift, and short-lived, so also is that of the ill-fated wedded pair of Venice. In both instances it is

> "Swift as a shadow, short as any dream:
> Brief as the lightning in the collied night,
> That, in a spleen, unfolds both heaven and earth,
> And ere a man hath power to say—Behold!
> The jaws of darkness do devour it up."

In the late and early tragedy you have the same blindness of passion and hasty precipitancy of action; the same want of foresight and sad dreaminess of soul; the same thrilling experiences and early prevision of woe; the same swift and sudden blasting by a revolutionary and volcanic force of a chivalrous, purified, and exalted love in the bloom and beauty of its budding. But nevertheless "Othello" is clearly distinguished from the normal love-tragedy of which "Romeo and Juliet" is the most celebrated example, inasmuch as the whole interest, incidents, and charac-

ters are not completely subordinated to the one great master-passion.

In the Comedies, which are all beautified by the infusion of a gay and lovable spirit, Shakespeare—carried wherever an exuberant poetic fancy and a gift of inextinguishable laughter leads him—deals with artless, happy, ideal, and but little-tried love. And in the early tragedy of "Romeo and Juliet," so exquisite and simple in its touching power, he gives us a vivid picture of deep, ardent, yet defeated and almost fruitless love; of perfect conjugal affection, unconsummated, however, by home experiences and home delights. But here, in "Othello," he realises and fulfils the dream of the love-bewildered Romeo, who is always eager and excited in adoration and enjoyment; and seeks to touch his audience through the soberer, and more moving, medium of household sorrows. We thus obtain in this play a glimpse of the life within a life. In which regard it takes rank not with "Romeo and Juliet,"—which, with its brilliant and delicious colouring and its brief note of lyric exultation, soft and sweet as the trill of nightingales, is indubitably the greatest example of romantic drama that has ever been created in the erotic style,—but with the heart-stirring, darkly impassioned domestic drama of "Alcestis," by the great "scenic philosopher" Euripides, with its deep prophetic colouring, its pure household pathos, its subtle interaction of moral and intellectual powers.

In "Othello," as I have already hinted, the poet virtually becomes the exponent of the doctrine that the true purpose of poetry is moral instruction. Hence the passion of love, which some regard as its central impulse, is treated in a vaster, grander, more memorable manner than usual; in conjunction, that is, with other and fiercer rival passions, in relation to other and more complex circumstances, in association with stronger powers and farther-reaching aims and actions than are to be met with in any previous effort of his muse. Here Love is seen to have a more vital and yet mysterious connection with the presiding moral forces of human life. It attains at certain points an ethical ecstasy. And as we perceive it vainly and ineffectually struggling against the soul-deadening corruptions of sin and sense; as we watch the

terrible conflict between Nature and Custom, the dread collision of the nobly credulous character of the Moor—that child of Nature, burning with the divine rage and enthusiasm of a wild and tropical life—with the mean, sensual, serpentine character of Iago —that realistic freethinker and sapient man of the world, who "knows all qualities with a learned spirit of human dealings"— we feel at once that there is something more than the spirit and significance of "Romeo and Juliet" in this masterpiece; and that for reasons higher and better than any suggested by the passing beauty of pure youth or the perfect rightness of youthful passion opposed and crossed by the enmity of two rival houses and stricken by fate, "Othello" may justly be regarded as a peerless work of tragic art.

VI.

From what, then, let me ask, does it derive its supremacy and power? What is the significance of it all? Does the central point of its spiritual import lie in love strong as death, or in jealousy cruel and unreasoning as the grave? No. These are essential elements; but they do not, separately or by their united action, constitute the spiritual motive that controls the tragedy. Its real significance, its central and abiding interest, is to be discovered in the contrast which the poet, with profound psychological perception, makes between two individuals who are projected from his own subjectivity, not studied from types of contemporary life; between the absolute villain Iago, with his unimpressible introversive mind, to which all things appear common and unclean and self-explicative, and his noble and guileless victim, with his liberal, incurious, and eminently credulous mind, which, as it has regard only to what is direct and healthy and objective, is easily "perplex'd in the extreme" by what is subtle and occult. And the power and supremacy of the play are consequent upon the breadth and clearness, the subtlety and skill, with which this contrast between the cold, malignant, sensual, self-sufficing intellectualist and the warm-hearted, open-minded, and sturdy warrior of pure principle and earnest feeling is conceived, discriminated, and sustained.

And hence, although love goes down here to the very roots of character, and passion informs the poetry as blood does the body, "Othello" is not a love-tragedy in the strict sense of that term. It is distinctively and pre-eminently a Tragedy of Conflict, just as "Macbeth" is the Tragedy of Temptation and "Hamlet" the Tragedy of Thought. It reveals great forces warring with one another: a titanic strife of egoistic desires with moral duties; an action and reaction for ever going on between Love and Doubt, Heart and Honour, Curiosity and Conscience, the animal element of life tyrannising over the spiritual faculty, and the erring and arrogant and rebellious will of man opposing resolutely but ineffectually that holier Will or inevitable necessity which maps out human life. We have here a vivid picture of the soul of man taken in the toils: now seeking peace and good on paths where no peace or good is ever found, and again fighting bravely but impotently with the dark influences of Ignorance, Misery, and Sin. And in this sultry strife of purity with pollution, of force and frankness with falsity and fraud, of completest candour with closest craft,—in this terrible conflict between the direct, simple, purely intentioned character of the Moor and the reptilian nature of that arch-corrupter Iago, whose sleepless and unrelenting malice is hatched out of the reeking mud and slime of his own passionless soul—a thing surely more memorable and markworthy, even in an artistic sense, than the famous contest of Apollo with the Python, or the contest of Hercules with Ladon,—lies the real spirit and pith of the tragedy. The frightful and fatal power which springs from the dark and bitter malignancy of the Ancient overshadows, and, indeed—so great is the interest which it awakens—almost puts out of remembrance for a time the brighter and sweeter emotion of love which pervades and consecrates the entire nature of the Moor and his bride. Where is the philosopher who is not moved when he thinks of the close and mysterious relationship that subsists between the infernal spirit of Iago and the noble and instinctively trustful nature of Othello? It is on that, rather than on the sweet but short relationship of Desdemona and the Moor, that the interest centres.

That, then, which in my opinion gives this play a claim to pre-

cedency over all the other tragedies of our poet, and raises it above all other dramas in our theatres, is its deep psychologic grain, its unexampled solidity and inwardness, its vital correlation to actual humanity, its spiritual atmosphere of life and intellect and character, that in every part predominates and prevails. Shakespeare's "Romeo and Juliet"—with which some critics would fain class it—with all its fulness of music and fervour of passion, reveals in many places the exuberance of immaturity, and may be said to be but a love-child of "his salad days, when he was green in judgment." Its mightier brother "Othello" is a solid and sincere expression of human thought and feeling: a work matured in the mysterious depths of a soul that has known much sorrow, and that is capable of idealising, with sage-like calmness and clearness, not one passion, but *all* conceivable passions on a large and world-arresting scale.

In the one drama you have simply the heart's abandonment to passion, whilst in the other you have added to that the soul's enslavement to sin. The early tragedy exhibits the supremacy of blind and enthralling desire, a dreamy and restless struggle between self-will and reason; but the later tragedy reveals the impious supremacy of the creaturely will, the conflict of the heavenly with the hostile principle, the corruption as well as the transformation of a character by passion. In "Romeo and Juliet" you have the history of a mood. The youthful Montague is held spell-bound by mere emotion that enriches and exalts. But in "Othello" you have a fearful story of moral poisoning. The Moor is unable to rescue his imagination or recover his moral will from the terrible obsession of Iago's evil genius. Passing from the one to the other is like leaving the realm of legend and the land of dreams, with their sensuous and sultry splendours and airy visions, to enter upon the solid and sober domain of positive Fact, with its quickening and refreshing elements. For the polished perfection of a Praxiteles, which pleases, we thus get, so to speak, the stern and forcible realism of an Angelo, which educates, arouses, and dilates. In a word, the poet, in this "tragical Rembrandt" of 1604, penetrates the deepest and darkest labyrinths of passion, touches the sublime infinities of

human thought, and presents us with a psychological study which has afforded delight to many philosophers, and which has taxed the critical powers of many scholars to the utmost.[1]

VII.

In the preceding observations I have attempted, in the first place, to establish the proposition that in dealing with the serious dramas of Shakespeare we must not rest our critical judgment on æsthetic and logical grounds alone; but that we must take into account the natural relation of morality to art generally, and duly estimate the ethical effect of its every product. For only in such minute inspection of its moral purport will the essential significance of any great poem display itself. And I have endeavoured in the second place to show that the power and popularity of this particular piece depend not on the love-interest but on the inherent and perennial interest of the *entire* story: on the dramatic and psychological skill with which divers human passions are portrayed in the three principal *personæ*—Iago, Desdemona, and the Moor; and the boldness and felicity with which the poet, through these distinctive *media*, sweeps all the chords of the impassioned human spirit, and fathoms in verse the deepest mysteries of our complex nature.

We have therefore to consider in what follows of the present study not merely the formal beauty of the poetry, which like that of "Romeo and Juliet" is pitched in the deeper keys of passion —not simply its style and harmony, the rhythm of part with part, the variety and flexibility of its structure, the subtle ever-fascinating chimes of its so perfect melody; but its artistic inspiration or intellectual truth, its moral righteousness or virtue-making power. The material or formal invention of the poet indeed is, as I have indicated, a matter of secondary importance. That which here concerns us most deeply is his expressional or spiritual invention.

[1] "A word here and there of 'Hamlet' or 'Othello' would need for its explanation three pages of commentaries."—H. A. Taine, 'History of English Literature,' edition 1873, ii. 84.

And here let me remark that the "Othello," as truly as the "Hamlet" of Shakespeare, appeals as much to the intellect as to the heart. Only by the loftiest and most advanced psychological systems can either be interpreted and made known. And since, in the one case as in the other, there is so much to elude and baffle inquiry, it were of course unwise presumption on my part to pretend to open up the full poetical significance of "Othello." Yet, after an independent study of the play, I am encouraged to believe that the leading and fundamental ideas which Shakespeare wished poetically to shape and shadow forth can be discovered more readily by pursuing a different road to that which has hitherto been traversed by my predecessors. I could wish now to work out, on new lines, its psychology, and to formulate what is probably, in many respects at least, a fresh theory of the method and purpose of the poet. In other words, I here seek to reveal simply yet exhaustively its genius and creative principle or ground idea; to lay bare its deep wide-swelling undercurrent of concealed significance; and to mark the first principles or seminal ideas of its leading characters.

VIII.

Now, if his critical education is sufficient, the reader will at once perceive that the development which it is possible to trace in "Othello" is no mechanical process of construction but growth of a real and vital kind. The root out of which the whole grows forth like a vegetable organism is the character of Iago, which Shakespeare presents as a psychological problem to which all the other *personæ* are placed in inner relation. This is the point from which the poet starts. The Ancient rather than the Moor is in reality the principal character of the play. For it is he who not only determines the course of the plot but also of all the other characters of the piece.

Although, properly speaking, the catastrophe is alone rendered possible by the quite unconscious yet perfectly consistent and harmonious mental and moral action of the three chief personages,

Desdemona, Othello, and Iago, it is still in the latter that you really find the spiritual centre of the drama, the formative principle out of which the tragedy is created and constructed. To comprehend Iago therefore is essential to the just appreciation either of Othello or his bride. For, just as one organic cell is said to be the origin of species, so here in Iago—a complete, complex, individual organism projected from Shakespeare's own subjectivity — you have compressed the inspiring motive-force, the living and life-giving principle or rudimentary soul of its entire action. But for him, who controls all the complications of fate and all the issues of human action, the sublime and mighty destiny that the poet depicts in this domestic drama as being directly due to the dreadful and dominating influence of the destroyer would have dwindled down into a mere homœopathic dilution of tragedy, with only "the eternal and vulgar figures of jealousy and innocence, newly vamped and veneered and padded and patched up for the stalest purposes of puppetry,"[1] to wring the heart with pity or freeze the blood with terror.

It is true that if you cut into the substance of the tragedy in order to fathom its origin, the course of its development, the tragic conflict to which it inevitably leads, you will certainly discover amidst the variously interwoven threads of its plot other forces actively at work preparing or facilitating the *dénouement*. These co-operating and concurrent influences are objectified by the self-destructive proceedings of Desdemona and Othello themselves. Hence we have to deal here not only with the original ever-active malignity of Iago's nature, with its all-absorbing pride of intellectual mastery; but also with the too-impressible, too-confiding, and ultra-romantic nature of Desdemona, with its imprudence, its incurious trust, its unresenting gentleness, and its forgivable yet essentially incriminating infidelities of thought and word and deed; and likewise with the credulous, passionate, unreasoning nature of Othello, which breaks out into lawlessness, savagery, and immediate murder when once it supposes that its honour is tampered with or its trust betrayed.

Motiveless malignity that is inbred and insatiable; unreason-

[1] Swinburne, 'A Study of Shakespeare,' 182.

ing impulse that is constitutional and self-convicting; aristocratic pride and a keen sense of honour that are hereditary and habitual, —or, in other words, the close consummate craft of Iago, the imprudence of Desdemona, and the wild volcanic passion of the Moor,—these are the chief influences, the action and interaction of which produce the culminant catastrophe. Thus, after all, we have to deal in our present study not with the play of a solitary force but with three correlative and co-operating forces; not with one supreme individuality, strictly speaking, but with three personages who stand in a firm intrinsic connection with one another; not with one train of circumstances but with three series of events, in each of which is discoverable an ideal unity or a connecting fundamental idea. The development of the story proceeds from, through, and by each other. Or, as has been admirably remarked by Mr Swinburne, "the one entire and perfect chrysolite of 'Othello' is neither Othello nor Desdemona nor Iago, but each and all."

Of course, as the reader is aware, there is what I may call a powerful body of artificial instrumentalities—Brabantio, Roderigo, Cassio, Emilia, and Bianca—in whom are passions and desires of another order, which require to be noticed as factors in the shaping and development of the piece. Thus to the principal forces just mentioned there might again be added those organic impulses by which the subordinate, but by no means superfluous, characters, are moved. For they are all drawn with the most replete and consummate originality; and their harshness, excess, imprudence, levity, and unreason are directly, if unintentionally, contributory elements towards the tragic issue. But these personages, it must be remembered, are after all simple phenomena, always energised, utilised, controlled and completely overshadowed by that more complex phenomenon which the poet names Iago, round whom, as the one great creative and inspiring force in the evolution of the drama, they move as the earth moves round the sun in a predetermined orbit; and without whom the terrible complications and tragic dissonances in which with hand and voice they all play a part, could never and would never have transpired. Hence, as I have already said, although

these minor characters are, so to speak, the nodes of the plot from which new developments spring, all that is in reality radically and irrecoverably evil, dangerous, and disastrous concentrates itself in the three leading *personæ*—the Ancient, the General, and his bride, whose characters interpenetrate, more or less, one with another, and stand together in mutual dependence and support.

IX.

And what first strikes the student-reader of "Othello" perhaps is the wisdom with which the poet arranges these principals with respect to each other; the matchless dexterity with which he sets them in motion; the artistic subtlety with which he influences them by most different motives, and yet causes them to co-operate towards an internal unity. Having regard myself to this great outstanding feature of excellence, I cannot for the life of me comprehend how any discriminating critic can speak of "King Lear" as the greatest dramatic achievement in modern literature. And yet Shelley, Lamb, De Quincey, and Dowden have all explicitly done so. Why, the tragedy of "Othello" in these respects alone is indubitably the greatest work in the world. For neither in "King Lear"—with all its largeness of conception, its strangeness of splendour, its mingled sublimity and grotesqueness—nor indeed anywhere else, do you find such solidity and verisimilitude of fact in human portraiture, or such consummate artistic skill in the individualisation and grouping of characters at once so varied, so distinct, and so massive. In no drama, ancient or modern, do you discover the same intuitive psychological perception of human passion in its purest and most powerful energy; the same intricate blending of characters with their animating impulses; the same spiritualisation of the sensual; or the same wealth, range, and amplitude of ethical thought, which, from its catholicity no less than its cogency, must in all ages touch the general heart and mind.

What, for instance, can be stranger and more startling than the close and fatal juxtaposition of two such totally diverse and

incommunicable natures as those of Othello and Iago? And yet, notwithstanding the effect of indefiniteness and mystery which their indissoluble relationship produces, they represent throughout a complete and natural unity of interest and impression. What at first sight can be more unfit and unnatural, too, than the union of the fair Venetian with this tawny Mauritanian prince? And yet, through all vicissitudes of fortune, despite all outward diversities of form, of country, or of lineage, there is infallibly an inward correspondence to be seen; and they prove themselves in the short term of their eventful wedded life—so full of generous hopes, spontaneous faith, and piteous illusion—to be in reality the proper complement of each other.

What, again,—just to touch here for a moment on subordinate but equally illustrative matter,—can surpass the subtlety and skill with which the poet unites by bonds that death alone can break the cold intellectual sensualist Iago with the simpleton-lover and virtueless flesh-fly Roderigo: the pride of purse overmastered by the pride of intellect; the one being representing intelligence, the other representing unintelligence; the first, a type of inhumanity in its reckless strength, the second, a type of humanity in its wanton weakness? And what is more lifelike and suggestive than the close personal contact, the mutual confidence, and unrestricted verbal intercourse of "the gentle Desdemona,"—that young, serene, and blameless wife, whose "most blessed conditions" remain untainted and undimmed by all the crafty insinuations of impure associates, just as her love (albeit she is "a child to chiding") survives the violence of her husband's tongue and the brutal beatings of his hand,—and the unscrupulous, coarse-minded wife Emilia—that frivolous and fleshly free-fancier of Venice, who has no personal sense of rightness, no idea of sex-relationships other than that which might be had from the inhabitants of a second-rate bagnio, who holds her virtue only by a sort of loosely tied "slip-knot," and who is perhaps even willing to cast away the marriage-bond altogether as soon as it has become a painful encumbrance! See, too, how naturally and how significantly the fate and fortunes, not only of the bookish Florentine Michael Cassio, but of Desdemona and the Moor, are

linked with those of that poor Paphian creature Bianca. It is through her that the last "proof" of infidelity is supplied. By her comes the voice denouncing doom to the innocent Desdemona. The soldier, frank and generous, but dull and infirm of purpose, and the fretful and frivolous but warm-hearted courtesan, together help to heap up the "tragic loading" of Othello's marriage-bed.

Here, then,—in confirmation of what I said at the commencement of the previous section,—we see and feel the work of forces which have always a certain definite tendency to produce certain definite results. A chain of cause and effect runs through all events. Every antecedent has its consequent; and by the necessity of sequence everything falls naturally into its place. Characters are placed in organic contrast; and circumstances are knit together in an organic way. They are all represented in a succession that is perfectly productive and inevitable, because logical—that is, in the order of principle and consequence; and this although the actuating motive of one character is distinct from, and often antagonistic to, that by which another is inspired and swayed. All these subordinate *personæ* represent but modifications of a Force which is the source and centre of the rest. Whilst the several characters draw out each other by mutual influences, Iago in reality compels their movements, and in a sense adequately explains them. Whilst the total effect is produced by a co-ordination of all the *personæ*, it is yet in him that all the lines of interest cross and converge.

X.

Now the vital coherence and reciprocity which is noticeable in *all* the characters of the play is of course most conspicuously marked in the speech and actions of the three chief *personæ*. Indeed the mutual agencies and relations of Iago, Desdemona, and Othello, round whom the whole action and interest revolve, are close and continuous, and as much under law as the courses of the stars. As to Desdemona, however, it may here be observed

that whilst the tragic catastrophe could not be accomplished without her, she still occupies in relation to Othello and Iago a kind of subordinate place. If you crush a germinant acorn it is the merest commonplace to say that you kill an oak. And of course if you crush Desdemona out of the position which she holds between these two—she being at once the object of the Moor's suspicion and the means through which the deadly malice of the Ancient works—you at once destroy in the germ that which furnishes a probable or reasonable basis for the future tragedy.

It is worthy of remark, however, that whilst Shakespeare has for this reason delineated the character of Desdemona with sufficient discrimination, the influence which she exerts, whether of a negative or positive kind, is weaker and confined within a narrower sphere than that which plays through the characters of those with whom her life is indissolubly bound up. Her heart is completely subdued to the very quality of her lord; and to her wifely duties her moral and intellectual being is entirely subordinated. Her tender, artless, feminine nature is less perfectly organised, less compact and self-sufficing, than that of either of her associates. Childlike in its unquestioning trust, its unreasoning acquiescence, its defenceless innocence, it is less able to withstand the assaults of evil, more prone to become its victim, if not its tool. Always feeling "a sublime necessity of good," she is loath to believe in the existence of its opposite; conscious of her own worthiness, she is incredulous of evil. Purity, docility, fidelity, a heavenly humility and a sweet patience of soul—these things you will find informing and enriching her character; but you will also find other elements which point to that fatal coherence and reciprocity of thought and action of which I have been speaking,—namely, a too-generous impulsiveness of temperament, a total inexperience of the world and human life, and an unconquerable timidity of disposition, that impairs self-trust and destroys that efficiency and directness of nature by which alone practical difficulties can be mastered and victory attained in the strife with evil.

Desdemona is not distinguished, like Portia or Helena or Beatrice, by conspicuous mental endowments; nor yet, like Juliet or Imogen or Cordelia, by heroic independent action or strenuous

and unfaltering resistance to whatever hurts or hampers. She is rather distinguished by her passive virtues, by her incapable sweetness and gentleness of heart, that can neither resent nor resist injury. And therefore she is placed by the poet in closest relation to the two dominating figures of the drama, set down between the noble warrior and the Judas who betrays them both, not in order that she should in any remarkable degree act herself, but in order that she should be largely acted upon by the great masculine forces of Iago and Othello. The Moor, as events proceed, regards and treats her as his property. The Ancient, from the first, views her as his preappointed prey. A link is wanting between two craving parts of nature; and Desdemona steps in to supply the yawning need. Standing between these two, scorched and scarred by the bitter and biting malignity of the one, raised and lowered alternately by the flux and reflux of the deep, loud-sounding, tempestuous passion of the other, her position has been happily defined by the application of that quaint and forcible old English by-word—"between the devil and the deep sea." First the one defeats, and then the other destroys, her life. Hemmed in on either side, there is no escape possible for her.

And thus, because of the fine moral qualities of her nature and the harshness and hardness of that fate which overtakes her, Desdemona possesses for us a deep and undying interest. We accept her indeed as one of Shakespeare's most faultless pictures of the invincible loyalty of true wifehood. But we cannot regard her as a strong active participant in that great controversy which unfolds and develops itself in the course of the tragedy. She is the beauty of the drama; but its strength comes from Iago and Othello. Morally and intellectually the real debate is carried on by the two male principals. The internal struggle between them is an eminently ethical one. It issues in the utter subjection of a noble, simple, heroic human soul to the great adversary Sin: the complete and pitiful moral prostration of a being who is made for greatness, and who conscientiously aims at goodness, under the relentless down-trampling of a worthless but sagacious and keenly intellectual creature, who feels and forescents his way into the citadel of Othello's heart through the avenue of

his unblemished but vulnerable virtues. The battle waged is between the savage and the civilised man, between duty and self-interest, between love and revenge, between self-esteem that is inbred and passionate and malignity that is constitutional but passionless.

No more impressive contrast could possibly be conceived, therefore, than that which Othello and Iago represent. In the former the sensibilities predominate; in the latter the intellect. The Moor is a strong heroic son of Nature, who is sustained throughout by the conscience of rectitude, and who attains success in life by his own joyous placid strength of character, his enthusiastic regard for all manly virtues, his directness and liberality of mind and manner, and his open upright dealing. Over against this impersonation of nobility is the Ancient, a true son of Night, who sets conscience at defiance and makes game of goodness; who regrets that he sometimes lacks iniquity to do him service; and, as if deprecating a prevailing cant, speaks contemptuously and disdainfully of "the *stuff* of the conscience." He gains all his triumphs only by the constringent force of the intellect and the dæmonic energy of the will. He succeeds by wrong, he rises by crime, he grows great by deliberate inversion of the moral order of things. The fundamental characteristic of the one mind is its *objectivity*, while that of the other is its *subjectivity*. Or, in other words, in the one character feeling predominates over thought; in the other thought predominates over feeling. Othello is eminently sensuous, plastic, passionate, his bias being towards continuity, simplicity, and definiteness; whilst Iago is chiefly reflective, his tendency being to connect by rapid transitions all outward things with his inward life.

XI.

It is further noteworthy that although Othello, like Achilles, has a kind of *secret* nobleness, and is more for deeds than words, he is still ready to unbosom himself, like a clear and gurgling spring that loves the light which only the better reveals its

freshness and its purity. But Iago, who has all the *candour of craft*, retains darkly in the foul cistern of his heart whatever has drifted thither; and — showing the organical duplicity of his nature—he himself says to his victim, with a fiendish chuckle of self-satisfaction, that you could not know his heart "if it were in your hand." The nature of the one is free, open, unreserved: incapable of simulating anything on the outside that is not really in his heart; prevented by its own simplicity and loyalty of suspecting in others malignity and fraud. In the words of Desdemona, the noble Moor

> "Is true of mind, and made of no such baseness
> As jealous creatures are."

But the nature of the other, in its normal manifestations, is close, constrained, and crafty: incapable of genuine frankness by reason of its essential irremediable falsity; always disproving its professions by its practices, and always cozening truth with a friendly smile; constantly striving to conceal under a semblance of candour the basest treachery, or mask by a bland face of fraud the foul and festering soul within. Of this faculty of secrecy and exclusive vigilance, this Janus-like aptitude of mind and manner,[1] he makes a free and full disclosure in Act i. scene 1, when, in speaking to the poor gull Roderigo, he says—

> "For when my outward action doth demonstrate
> The native act and figure of my heart
> In complement extern, 'tis not long after
> But I will wear my heart upon my sleeve
> For daws to peck at; *I am not what I am.*"

Nowhere, if I except perhaps the case of Richard III., who has

[1] It is a fact, sufficiently significant perhaps to be worth mentioning here, that when this arch-hypocrite swears it is "by Janus" (Act i. sc. 2, l. 33)—the god of the *double-face*. This mythological adjuration seems eminently characteristic of, and peculiarly appropriate to, the character of Iago. Here, as everywhere, Shakespeare in the conceiving and working out of character is mindful of those small details which quietly, unobtrusively, almost accidentally, betray the secret workings of the mind and the inevitable bias of nature. He suits every *word* as well as every *action* to the essential identity of the character. The one as truly as the other enables us to infer a primitive disposition in the person depicted.

the same intellectual pride, the same biting and malicious wit, the same inexorable tenacity of purpose, and the same wicked adroitness and dissimulative skill—authenticated characteristics these, remember, of an actual historical being, and therefore the justification, perhaps even the source, of the poet's inspiration in respect of those imaginary pictures of his other great crime-heroes, Edmund, Iachimo, and Iago—do you find such a striking instance of profound dissimulation under the disguise of a rough and rugged soldier-like frankness.

XII.

The nature of Othello, again, whilst true and clear, is still deep as the unfathomable sea. It is one of passionate sensibility, framed for rich and varied pleasure. He has an eye to see the bounty and the beauty of the world, a heart to feel the grace and gaiety of life. He is profoundly moved by the spectacle of human joy and human sorrow; and the quietude of Brabantio's home, no less than the stir and strife of the tented field, tends to make his pulses throb and thrill. The material interests of life have not absorbed the spirituality of his being. The real has not overclouded the ideal. The wildness of his early life has not exhausted or corrupted his robust native wisdom, or uprooted those natural refinements of thought which one would expect to find in a being who can trace his descent from "men of royal siege." He is still ready, as truly as any Spartan or Roman of old, to acknowledge the empire of woman, and still able to feel the transforming and regenerating power of that strong human love through which, as the Laureate sings, man gains "in sweetness and in moral height." After a billowy, perilous, agitated course of existence, this Moorish noble finds in a virtuous woman's nature that which absorbs the whole plan and purpose of his after-life. To him Desdemona is "a wonder, and a beauty, and a terror; . . . a solitude, a refuge, a delight"—the perfection of physical and spiritual qualities: a woman so furnished and garnished with virtue as hardly to be equalled of any in the country of his adoption. And to live for her whose name is

clear and "fresh as Dian's visage"—that henceforth is the history of his life.

But Iago in his godless isolation is cold, calculating, obdurate. He is devoted to evil, and believes intensely in the creed of Hell. Absorbed in the hard actualities of life, and knowing all the artifices by which to heighten the corrupt pleasures of his fiendish mind, he manifests a petrifying indifference to human anguish and displays a total incapacity for noble pain. No remnant of mercy lingers in his heart, which, full of a dark, bitter, savage irony, grimly sports itself at sight of the sorrow and suffering of his credulous victims. Selfish and insatiable as Moloch, he declares, in a transport of fiendish ferocity, that he will practise upon Othello's "peace and quiet even to madness"; that "out of her own goodness" he will enmesh the guileless soul of Desdemona; and, like some stony-hearted Caligula, you find him with equal coolness killing Roderigo and his wife. He corrupts or consumes everything he touches, and yet remains to the end a fierce and unappeasable spirit. Need it be said, then, that Iago is not and cannot be penetrated by the moral beauty of womanhood? His atheism of womanly truth and honour is complete and absolute. Villainy is the tone and colour of his mind. It affects every conclusion and distorts every judgment. Goodness is impotent therefore to chastise the gross devil in him, to diminish or draw out the venom and black perfidy of his faithless heart. And hence, according to this learned spirit, woman's true use and function is "to suckle fools and chronicle small beer." Such a diabolic-animal type of humanity is not to be moved or persuaded by a woman's love. His marriage with Emilia has effected no change. Just as Molière depicts Harpagon in love though a miser, and leaves him a miser though in love, Shakespeare not only makes Iago a young man but a married man, and yet leaves him the most perfect and potent demi-devil after all. Indeed the normal type of Italian, so gifted for intrigue and conspiracy, rarely becomes the fool or the tool of a woman when a deeper game is on the card. Love with him is practical, a thing for action: physical mainly, not sentimental; pertinacious, despotic, one-ideaed. To Iago, Emilia is fit only for an auxiliary or

accomplice in his villainies; and love is "merely a lust of the blood, and a permission of the will," for which she stands as at once the symbol and satisfaction. With all the shrewd sagacity of a sly and secret villain who subjects all things to the control of the passionless intellect, he argues with the duped Roderigo that "if the balance of our lives had not one scale of reason to poise another of sensuality, the blood and baseness of our natures would conduct us to most preposterous conclusions; but," he adds, "we *have* reason to cool our raging motions, our carnal stings, our unbitted lusts; whereof I take this, that you call love, to be a sect, or scion." In this manner he lays hold of every mind, charms it within his own magic circle, corrupts and clouds it beyond all chance of relief or restoration.

XIII.

Again: Othello has a high-aspiring mind, a fierce spirit of independence, a relentless intolerance of dishonour which his pure and burning passion for Desdemona only deepens and intensifies. But, like the noble Kent in "King Lear," he has "more man than wit about him." He believes that human nature is like a rich mine full to repletion of precious ore; but he forgets that each man has carefully to assay the ore for himself before he can know what is gold and what is not. Or, in the words of our play,

> "The Moor is of a free and open nature,
> That thinks men honest, that but seem to be so:"

and of course, as the Ancient foresees, he will

> "as tenderly be led by the nose,
> As asses are."

He is no match for the subtlety and serpent-guile of an Italian liar and slanderer who thus reads his character like an open book, and works upon him against his better sense. The moment he begins to reflect he is a child. He feels with all the tenderness of a woman, but he scarcely ever reasons like a man. He

rates opinions, success, even life itself, cheaply; and is content to base his greatness on his own goodness, and the substantial services he has rendered to the Signiory of Venice; to rest his happiness on the approval of his own heart and the conscious integrity of his own mind, like the amiable and heroic Hector of "Troilus and Cressida," who says—

> "Life every man holds dear, but the brave man
> Holds honour far more precious dear than life."

And even the knowledge of his natural inefficiency to cope single-handed with the wily and intriguing Venetians amidst whom his lot is cast does not lead Othello to adopt any of those precautions which the commonest prudence might suggest. He is scornful of petty calculations, and with "calm intensity" relies exclusively on his own energy and judgment. Born into the state of war, this imperious and splendid Eastern who is "not soon provoked, nor, being provoked, soon calmed," has a boundless contempt for safety and ease, and deems himself able to withstand all actual and all possible antagonists, to take both reputation and life in his own hand, doing and daring all by the absolute truth of his speech and the perfect rectitude of his behaviour:

> "My parts, my title, and my perfect soul,
> Shall manifest me rightly."

His, therefore, is a self-trust which slights all the guidings of policy and all the restraints of prudence. Like Ajax, he is self-reliant to the extent of impiety. He supposes that his "perfect soul," his inward qualities, unaided by divine grace, shall in all things manifest him rightly; just as the hero of the Sophoclean story boasts that his bravery needs not the assistance of the gods, and that independently he can achieve renown and win the foremost place. He knows his worth, and would keep things under his feet, not willingly subjecting himself to the censure of others. But he forgets that with all his courage and constancy he cannot resist temptations, or weigh facts, or interpret appearances, or test circumstances aright, or even differentiate between genuine and hypocritical counsels and attentions. His heart is high, his will

is faithful; but his sight is dim and purblind, and his mind is easily perplexed. Eventually this vain self-trusting virtue of his displays itself in weakness, witlessness and wild revenge. And in the end he simply pays the penalties of vitiated powers and of violated functions.

But how different is it with this ribald and remorseless rogue Iago, this Asmodeus of domestic peace who crawls stealthily, snake-like, into the sacred sanctuary of love and honour to make of all a miserable wreck![1] It may be said that there is a good deal of fine manhood in Milton's Satan; but in this infernal spirit there is nothing but sordor and rank earthiness. He depends not on truth of speech or rectitude of conduct, but on the force of a will-wielded intellect that can neither be bought nor bent. Limitless personal power is that at which he aims, and in all his efforts to compass his end he proceeds upon *habits* not on *principles* of life. For no laws but those of the Devil are practicable in his world; and no power, no persuasion, no bribe can make him yield his point or modify his purpose to which he holds "with the tug of gravitation." Restraint, limitation, moral repression of whatever kind—that only is a sin of nature and society to be resisted and defied. Knowing his price he makes his victims pay roundly for his friendship; always, with true Italian instinct, pursuing pelf as a medium of power, actuated by the lust of sway rather than the greed of gain. A materialiser of all Christian spiritualities, he has no sensibilities of honour to be hurt. Therefore he betrays throughout the utmost recklessness of moral feeling.

And as his nature is animated by strong impulses, so it is fortified and sustained by great resources. He is a perfect evil-doer, a most potent demi-devil. For not only has he an instinc-

[1] As bearing on this Asmodeus-idea, I may mention that Mr Ruskin declares that Iago and Iachimo "have evidently the same root—probably the Spanish Iago, Jacob, 'the supplanter.'" Certainly it is used by Marston and others as Jacomo. (See 'Athenæum,' No. 2553, 30th September 1876.) Collier again informs us that Iago is "the same name as Jago, which is still a common appellation in Cornwall."—See Hazlitt's 'Shakespeare's Library,' Pt. I. vol. ii. 284, *note*. The Shakespearian form is to be found in the 'Mirror for Magistrates.'

tive faculty and aptitude for criminal intrigue, an elastic and exhaustless genius for malicious mischief, but courage, audacity and energy, prudence and presence of mind, vivacity and aplomb. His range of scale indeed is marvellous. He can pass swiftly from fiendish ferocity to exquisite refinement of utterance, and then back again. The chameleon itself is not more facile in the changing of its colour according to its wants and passions. And if his range is great, so also is his retrieving power. If, for example, whilst exercising his wit on that "poor trash of Venice," Roderigo, he loses for a moment somewhat of his personal poise, he can speedily recover his balance again and adroitly readjust his snare. He recoils before no infamous action when he has a purpose to serve; but his concentration never alters or absorbs the cat-like caution of his craft:

> "'Tis much he dares;
> And to that dauntless temper of his mind,
> He hath a wisdom that doth guide his valour
> To act in safety."[1]

Or, to put it in a homelier way, he hunts with the hounds and runs with the hare.

Iago knows men and all the subtle and complex conditions of human life; he knows and values the power of Circumstance; he can note and interpret all changes of appearance; he can detect every flaw and every peccant part in the characters of his associates. Thus with powers proportioned to his ambition he exercises undisputed sway and bends to his will the imaginations of all men. His exorbitant egotism is deadly to all. It narrows, impoverishes, absorbs the power and very existence of every one who serves or comes into contact with him. He knows nothing of foiled plans, or baffled purposes, or abortive projects. His shafts always fly well and always pierce deeply.

It is also markworthy that Iago, who is "nothing if not critical," never feels but always reasons. His hate is hearted in the head; his will is free and unfettered; his sight is keen and clear as that of the Barbary lynx; and his brain is quick, searching, unperplexed

[1] "Macbeth," iii. 1, 51-54.

and undisturbed by mysteries and misgivings. Hence at all times he carefully chooses, calmly discriminates, firmly decides; and, with ravening egoism that is constantly at war with the beautiful and true, complacently covers his passionless, self-degraded nature with the deadly nightshade-flowers and the Sodom-fruits of evil, neither heeding nor hiding the dreadfulness of his own damnation. In the end he too realises his life simply by fulfilling with mechanical exactness its natural and preappointed functions; and he perishes out of the consequences of his own enormities when, Icarus-like, he mounts too high.

XIV.

But, to end this preliminary estimate of these contrasted characters, Othello, whose nature perhaps has more in common with all mankind than that of any other hero, has an instinctive reverence for what is solid, gentle, beautiful, pure and true. His rank and value as a moral being are so plain as to be legible even to the most careless observer. But Iago has no knowledge of the finer and tenderer feelings of our nature. He is destitute of all faith in love, honour, fidelity, and domestic awe. Levity, malignity, and all the recklessness of vice can be seen stamped indelibly on the face of this bluff soldier of fortune. We see in him all the symptoms of venomous, infectious, irrecoverable sin; all the everlasting signs of a damned conscience. The one, being himself upright, is a devout believer in the integrity of others and in the essential rectitude of the human soul. Indeed, this idea which leads him to believe in the "exceeding honesty" of that double-tongued smooth-spoken villain to whom his ear is always open, not only commands and controls but eventually wrecks his life. The other, being himself depraved, naturally believes in the depravity of others. He is an atheist of human goodness, a believer in the inevitable dominion of grossness. With the indifference of a Machiavelli or the cynical audacity of an Aretino, he proclaims that virtue is only some bubble of the blood to be burst at will.

Here then are two richly-endowed beings whose natures are essentially antipathetic the one to the other. And yet in the linked necessity of evil these two Inconsistencies rushing together only to neutralise each other, become notwithstanding mutually consistent and coherent. Here surely lies one of the deepest world-ironies, as the Germans would say, that could possibly be provided for the astonishment of mankind! The noble Moor and the ignoble Ancient become coadjutors and co-workers in the perpetration of deeds that are base and cruel. It matters not that by nature Othello is the antagonist of that evil and hostile principle which Iago incarnates: Circumstance, which brings these two into closest contact, is relentless, and with merciless certitude destines and provides that he too shall imbibe its virus and become its slave and victim. The hero of Aleppo, Rhodes, and Cyprus makes this super-subtle Florentine his mentor and mind-stay, and straightway all his glories are whistled down the wind!

XV.

How, then, in view of these inborn contradictions and anomalies of character and situation, shall we account for the moral association and united practical action of Iago and Othello? By what principle are these incongruous beings held together staunch and inseparable? How can this visible contradiction between the lower and the higher elements of nature be solved? And to what shall we ascribe the complete moral declension of this free, noble, lordly creature who with all his shortcomings is indisputably "the noblest man of man's making," the most fully-drawn character of Shakespeare's poetry, not Hamlet himself presenting at once a more attractive and perplexing subject for psychological analysis?

To be real and intelligible there must of necessity be some sympathy, some affinity between these two. For, as you never fail to find an organic adjustment between an animal and its enemy or parasite, so you never quite fail to discover between human beings thus associated a *nexus* or necessary interdepend-

ence that is definite and explicable. This then is not a capricious fact, the result of external and fortuitous conditions; but an unavoidable phenomenon arising from the combination or interaction of elements distinct yet indivisible. For it is of the very essence of spirit to contain within itself relation to other spiritual beings; but involution must alway precede evolution. These two forming an eternal equation, you can only extract from the nature of a man therefore what is visibly or invisibly put into it; so that every phenomenal change and every evolutive manifestation of its ethical state necessarily presupposes the pre-existence of an adequate cause. And this is the fact to which the poet, with unerring instinct in ethics, gives prominence, and is that therefore on which I would here seek to fasten the close attention of my reader.

XVI.

In his Tragedies, which deal with the struggle of good and evil in the world, Shakespeare always sets himself to the task of illustrating character and passion. And the co-ordination of Iago and Othello is, I think, designed to illustrate and enforce the settled scientific fact that no force can operate except where there are pre-established relations between its energies and that upon which its energies are to work. Their consummated union, in other words, is achieved by an inward and natural necessity.

And it is no answer to this somewhat unpalatable theory to say that as regards tastes and temper, or traits of character and traditions of race, we have in Iago and Othello two hard and reciprocally-repellent individualities. For I have not disputed the subjective difference between these two minds. Besides, we know that elective affinities between persons of opposite temperaments often arise from mental and moral dissimilarity such as that which I have described in the previous chapter. Men and women are mutually attracted and indissolubly bound together quite as often perhaps by the wonder of unlikeness as by the more self-flattering graces of resemblance and affinity; whilst it is also well to remember that spirit only discovers or realises its own nature

through natures that are foreign to or outside of itself. In point of fact, that in which Iago and Othello originally differ is just that out of which their ultimate unity arises.

XVII.

The real nature of the Moor, observe, does not make an immediate manifestation. It is reached and realised by a process of growth or development. Iago,—who, contrariwise, discloses under the mask of good intention in the very first act, which is in substance a prologue to the action, what he is made of and what he is moved by,—forescenting an unrevealed, unrealised, yet potential capacity for wrong-doing in the General's nature, sedulously practises on his "peace and quiet," clouds his intellect, enfeebles his will, tempts him to passionate self-abandonment, and forces his spirit into a state of permanent irritation; quickens, in a word, the germ of evil lying dormant in his soul, nourishes and ripens it by new devices that impoison his hot Mauritanian blood and rouse into deadly activity the fierce traditionary instincts of his race, until eventually it springs up and flourishes to his own eternal scandal, a baleful and all-blasting upas.

> "So, oft it chances in particular men,
> That for some vicious mole of nature in them,
> As, in their birth (wherein they are not guilty,
> Since nature cannot choose his origin),
> By the overgrowth of some complexion,
> Oft breaking down the pales and forts of reason;
> Or by some habit, that too much o'er-leavens
> The form of plausive manners;—that these men,—
> Carrying, I say, the stamp of one defect,
> Being nature's livery, or fortune's star,—
> Their virtues else (be they as pure as grace,
> As infinite as man may undergo),
> Shall in the general censure take corruption
> From that particular fault:—The dram of bale
> Doth all the noble substance of a doubt
> To his own scandal."[1]

[1] "Hamlet," Act i. sc. 4, ll. 23-38.

In a certain sense Iago but *educes* what is in his victim. Othello's mistrust, cruelty, and murder are simply the definite objective realisations of that hostile principle which subjectively existed in his half-barbaric nature from the first. Or, to put the matter more exactly, the innate predispositions to wrong-doing which have long lain dormant in the dark recesses of his being, but which have secretly been gathering strength and ascendancy all the while, suddenly objectify themselves, not simply and solely by the self-productive activity or the instantaneous volitions of his own spirit, but by the conjoint working of his corrupted will and external forces such as those which play through the subtle and magnetic nature of Iago who well knows how prone he is to receive the impressions of jealousy, and how ready he will be to revenge the mere suspicion of his consort's purity.

The morbid condition of Othello's character prepares a *nidus* for that moral disease and cruel alienation of mind which the persistent malignity of Iago creates and stimulates until at length it developes into madness and immediate murder. Having in an unguarded moment absorbed into his own some of the elements of the fierce and virulent nature of the Ancient who remains unaffected by the wretchedness that seeks to be relieved by him, the Moor gradually realises that henceforth he can neither annihilate nor abjure them, nor snap asunder the iron hoop of necessity that rings round his life.

XVIII.

We therefore see in Othello the strain and the strife of two selves—the higher and the truer self of reason, and the lower self of passion. Ceaselessly harassed and tormented by his tempter, there is no possibility of melioration; no way of escape from the disgraceful alliance he has formed. The evil principle of the lower self must triumph; and the cruel counsels of his *alter ego* must prevail. Thus it is that the Moor sinks into a condition of irreversible helplessness. And yet despite this terrible inward strain, this pitiful wrenching of his nature, it is

manifest that he might still atone for his fault and subdue his fate and even recuperate his wasted faculties were it not for the fact that all the odds of chance and circumstance are so terribly against him. "Within himself his better angel is the stronger, but his evil genius is allied with powers without, and between them he is overpowered. He contends with his worser impulses, and would conquer, but that an enemy is against him whose knowledge of his nature applies the most irritating stimulants exactly where he is most susceptible of pain, anticipates every reaction, admits of no repose—above all, loses not an instant of time, but presses on the excitement through all its stages, and gives all aid and opportunity and instrument to the crimes which are the last catastrophe." [1]

Here then lies the key to the intrinsic central point of the story. It is the *mutual action* of these two on each other, and their *conjoint working* throughout, that produces the great catastrophe. The reception and comprehension of this fact enables us at once to grasp the spiritual motive that controls the tragedy, and the mysterious and momentous ethical truth which lives and breathes in every part of it. And a perusal of the ensuing analysis which aims at disclosing in fuller measure the ideal or metaphysical necessity of Iago and Othello to each other will suffice, I trust, to render these conclusions plain and satisfactory.

[1] Lloyd, 'Critical Studies of the Plays of Shakespeare,' 461, 462.

CHAPTER II.

HONEST IAGO.

I.

THE reader will remember how Milton in his "Paradise Lost" prepares us in the fourth book for the grand catastrophe which is fully described in the ninth. The arch-fiend is therein depicted as assuming in turn the shape of several beasts (then harmless) with the view of acquiring certain knowledge of the condition of Adam and Eve, who roam in Eden "godlike erect, with native honour clad in naked majesty." Satan first appears as a lion, and in his paw dandles a kid. Then he assumes successively the shape of the bear, the pard, and the tiger; and, "still in gaze," watches in these disguises the gay-hearted gambols of two gentle fawns. But from the sportive or solemn wheelings of these animals our attention is suddenly withdrawn, and we are particularly invited to notice the shape which Satanic mischief ultimately assumes, and of the true nature of which the primeval pair are unhappily unconscious; that, namely, of the

"Serpent, sly, *insinuating*,"

who thus—

"Of his fatal guile
Gave proof unheeded."

Nothing could be happier than the employment here of the word "insinuating." For it not only suggests the etymological signification of the sinuous, winding entrance of a snake, weaving wilily "with Gordian twine his braided train"; but—and

this forms the more important impression — it also conveys the idea of that stealthy introduction of evil which proved the bitter curse of Eve. Here, however, Shakespeare, whose comprehensive intellect contained in germ the sum total of man's after-thought in most directions, gives indubitable proofs that the idea which Milton thus so gloriously conveys was also present to his mind when he conceived the character of this subtle and remorseless Italian intriguer who is the soul and axis or master-mind of the drama, and who sounds all these Othellos, Roderigos, and Cassios from the lowest note to the top of the compass.

The subtlety and baseness which are in consonance with our ordinary conception of insinuation are undoubtedly most suitably applied to the serpent amongst all the beasts of Paradise. But the serpent which tempted Eve was the spirit of unbelief; and therefore our poet with epical integrity here incarnates this spirit in a human form, in which we discover a weird blending of the reptilian with the human and intellectual element. The demi-devil Iago has all the earthiness of the serpent. He has likewise its viperous hiss, its enthralling fascination, its deadly power of spring and cruel constriction. And all his thoughts and habits bear the dark, repulsive, and indelible tints of the gross slime and dust on which his withered and callous soul has fed. Reputation is with him of less account than a bodily wound. Love is but a "lust of the blood." Virtue is valueless as a fig: "'tis in ourselves that we are thus or thus." Honour, loyalty, reverence, and fidelity—the highest and the holiest impulses of humanity—are but base commodities to be bought and sold. Beauty and innocence and eloquence have no power to charm; and no character and no principle, according to his sordid and ignoble reasoning, can long withstand the assault of him who, obeying his advice, puts money in his purse.[1] It is not by the heart but by

[1] See Act i. sc. 3. Did Shakespeare take the idea of this oft-iterated advice from a satirical point in one of the Coventry Miracle-Plays, the 14th Pageant, where the Usher of the Bishop's Court, then sitting in session to try Mary, who is charged with incontinence, summons the evil-livers Cook Crane, Davy Drydust, &c., and tells them to put money in their purse lest their cause fare ill? Mr J. A. Symonds, in his 'Shakespeare's Predecessors in the English

the mind that he is led: by what he perceives rather than by what he chooses; by what he learns rather than by what he loves. In other words, he is an intellectual sensualist, and atheist of human virtue; a stealthy, snake-like corrupter of human purity, and dauntless disturber of domestic peace; an unbeliever in, and denier of, all things spiritual, who only acknowledges God, like Satan, to defy or brave Him!

And it is significant that in a set simile Iago himself compares the body to a "garden," where the vices and the virtues may be planted like hyssop or lettuce; the will (not reason), which he calls the "gardener," holding all "the power and corrigible authority," and determining absolutely the nature and the quality of the moral crop; whilst it is by means of a fair and innocent external appearance—under the guise, that is, of a disinterested friendship—that with "Gordian twine" *he* confessedly coils round Othello's unsuspecting heart. Iago, observe, is "a busy and *insinuating* rogue"—as Emilia, though then unconscious of her own husband's treachery, describes the betrayer of the Moor—a being who fascinates Othello with the fair profession of his exceeding honesty, which is the glittering, delusive, "braided train" of this subtle reptile; and who strikes him with his barbed and lying tongue as he wanders "with native honour clad" through his new-found Eden.

And it is noteworthy, as completing the analogy, that Iago possesses a Protean faculty of immoral changefulness. He can temporarily abjure his own true nature—slough it as completely as ever serpent sloughed his skin. Knowing "all qualities, with a learned spirit, of human dealings," he can, with the utmost facility, adapt himself to his company. Thus with Roderigo, the mystified gull whom he incites to an immoral quest after the fair Venetian, and whom he makes his purse, he is the brilliant and

Drama,' 139, cites a similar warning from Mapes's rhymes upon the Roman Curia:—

> "And look ye ring well in your purse,
> For else your cause may speed the worse."

Coleridge, it may be added, is of opinion that Iago's words "put money enough in your purse" have *not quite a Shakespearian ring*. See 'Lectures and Notes' (Ashe's ed. 1883), 388 *note*.

experienced man of the world; a shrewd critic of life who has a lively perception of the hollowness of things. With Cassio, whom he is endeavouring to circumvent, the inveteracy of his hate relaxes somewhat. For a time he is the jovial good fellow and boon companion who, although then most fit for "treasons, stratagems, and spoils," breaks into music. With his quaint and jarring pot-house songs—

"And let me the canakin clink, clink;
And let me the canakin clink:"—

he contrives amid the rude riot and wanton wassail at Cyprus to inspire his chivalrous and enthusiastic dupe with that confidence which he intends shall prove his ruin. Iago's music resembles only the crepitating sounds of a serpent's rattles, or the ever-tightening movements of a windlass which grow louder, more discordant, and exasperating as the screw gets home! With Brabantio, whom he keeps on the rack with his obscene fancies, he is eminently polite and even-tempered. "Thou art a villain," says the irate and outraged father. "You are—a senator," replies the triumphant devil with a face from which one can well imagine all expression has fled—a face like death in life, cold, impassive, imperturbable and soulless: having no resemblance at all to the pictorial representations of the Satan of Milton's immortal epic in which you cannot fail to perceive all the terrible concentration of a fiendish malignant purpose blending strangely with the lingering grandeur of the recreant angel. With Desdemona again he assumes an air of tender disquietude when the deep, speechless fear that is destined to be abiding is first fluttering in her bounding heart and dark misgivings are overshadowing her sun-pure spirit:—

"Can he be angry?
Something of moment then: I will go meet him:
There's matter in't, indeed, if he be angry."

And with Othello himself he is constantly the earnest, thoughtful, devoted and observant follower whose honesty always outweighs his inclinations.

But with all this skill and readiness and forced hilarity and faculty of changefulness he never for an instant wavers from his

premeditated resolves; never for an instant loses sight of his victim. Indeed he is more remorseless even than the Tempter of the "Paradise Lost," with whom he has only one salient outstanding point of intellectual resemblance perhaps, Mr Hudson having indicated that he is a "highly magnified realistic freethinker." For, unlike Milton's Satan, he never tempers the acrid malignity of his utterances by any sentiments of pity or compassion for his hapless victims. The Prince of Hell, as he sits with outspread wings on the rugged bank, contemplating for the first time the happiness of Adam and Eve which he intends to destroy by means of the serpent that he has discovered after his midnight search "well stored with subtle wiles," shows at least some feeble sign of relenting. You behold a weak and momentary conflict going on between the lingering remnant of primeval goodness and the overmastering wickedness that is steadily proceeding to its triumph. An air of imaginative regret breathes through his utterance, and an outburst of unfeigned pity preludes the accomplishment of his fiendish purpose. But Iago betrays no such remorseful vacillation. No gush of compassion precedes the sacrifice. No compunctious visitings trouble the turbid current of his thought: no pressure of contrary emotions asserts itself to turn him even momentarily from his purpose. When he sees the happiness of Othello and Desdemona at their reunion in the seaport of Cyprus, he gives free vent to the overwhelming malice of his withered heart; and, in the very ecstasy of devilhood, exclaims,—

> "O, you are well-tun'd now!
> But I'll set down the pegs that make this music,
> As honest as I am."[1]

Iago's nature is inaccessible and glacial. He has no conscience; and his heart is one of stone—a stone, however, that alone resembles those pebbles which, when broken, are found to contain a serpent. His passions have residence in the head.[2] He perceives and measures everything in the loveless light of reason, cool and disengaged. He has no faith at all in spiritual and invisible influences. And hence his malevolent inventiveness

[1] Act ii. sc. 1, l. 202.

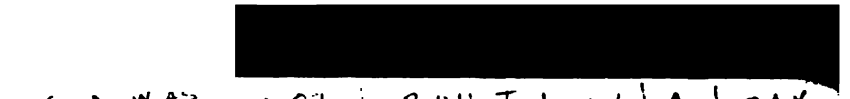
[2] See Hudson *ut supra*, ii. 470.

moves unrestrained by the shackles of the meanest morality. Will is dissolved into perception; and, impelled by his diseased intellectual force and activities, knowledge always falls into act. He turns virtue into pitch, and out of goodness forms the net wherewith to enmesh his victims.[1] He is the prime apostle of Satanic utilitarianism, and will not, in Hamlet's phrase, allow his imperious dauntless devilry, or his persevering serpent guile, "to fust in him unused." In no sense is he afflicted by the love or lust of unattainable things: "but what he can do that he will." Nothing can daunt, nothing can disconcert him. He represents, like Cæsar in ancient, like Napoleon in modern times, the great inexorable Ego which makes thought and action one.

The motive principle of Iago's nature is criminal motiveless action against others, not sensual self-indulgence. He is characterised by an innate original malignity that acts independently of self-interest or material advancement, rather than by a depravity of mind and heart that Accident has bred and Circumstance developed, leading him eventually to forsake for ever the paths of rectitude, and to seek in evil—as a permanent satisfaction to his misguided soul—what he has failed to obtain by the practice of goodness. Here evil is not partial and variable. Good and bad do not exist in mutual enmity mixed up together. His nature is homogeneously evil; his essence, in other words, is wickedness.

Iago, again, is no mere theorist. He never fails to give enduring form to his inclinations. Like an arrow flying to its goal, he pursues his object with directest resolution. He speedily reduces into practice the sinful schemes which he devises; and scorns to dull "device by coldness and delay."[2] The contempt which he professes to feel for Cassio, who is preferred before him, is primarily due to his being merely a soldier of "the bookish theoric"; unlike the Ancient, the simple but cultured Florentine is yet a stranger to the *practice* of war. And his contempt for theoretical arts is illustrated in every other relation of his life. He is ever alert, energetic, self-assured; full of wild ambition,

[1] Act ii. sc. 3, l. 368. [2] Act ii. sc. 3, l. 394.



eager desire, matchless sagacity; an adept in that "divinity of hell" which drives him into fatalism—that barren creed of all despots and usurpers—whose tragic axioms he alone reveals to us in the *actions* which spring from thence.

Indeed it is characteristic of him that the fertility of his imagination *demands* constant exercise as a safeguard to reason, which might else be overthrown by the weight of his horrible yet congenial thought. His hatred and malice, in other words, require vent and action. His mind is so overloaded by diabolical undertakings, that when a new idea occurs he must give it unrestrained liberty ere he can apprehend its full force and subtlety, and see it applied like a blister on some human soul ere he can derive any real satisfaction from its existence—

> "'Tis here, but yet confus'd:
> Knavery's plain face is never seen, *till us'd*.[1]

He can contemplate the predetermined catastrophe from afar; but his remote aims, which are so remote indeed as to produce something like confusion for a time, must be brought nearer. Adroit scheming is pleasurable to a mind so distinguished by restlessness, temerity, cunning, and lust of self; but active and absolute accomplishment is alone profitable, for that alone *exhibits* his unslumbering power. He knows the advantage of use and routine, and so he collects and swings his whole inner being into outward action; which kept in remembrance will assist us hereafter in the attempt to discover the real actuating principle of this bedevilled motive-millwright, as Carlyle would perhaps have called him.

II.

Iago desires to be master of life. He thirsts for power, and he obtains it. He longs for riches to advance his projects, and he practises all evil to acquire them. He yearns for revenge on those who have injured him—only however by being immeasur-

[1] Compare the passage in "Macbeth"—

> "The flighty purpose never is o'ertook,
> Unless the deed go with it," &c.—Act iv. sc. 1, ll. 146-149.

ably above him: whose virtues, that is, cast a disturbing, self-revealing, and convicting light into his heart, where, like Milton's Hell, there is "no light, but rather darkness visible"—and he gratifies and enjoys it. The strong nature he poisons and subdues, then binds it unalterably to his basest service. The tender, white-souled flowers of life he strives to blacken and corrupt; and what he cannot corrupt he will at least stultify, savagely tearing them up by the roots, pressing them, twisting them, crushing and trampling on them. The weak and voluptuous even he uses as potent instruments of a wide-spreading mischief—prickly weeds these, like thistles, whose downy soft-winged seeds float in the divinest air and fall upon most virgin places, there to corrupt and multiply, to choke and kill the rarer growths they cling to. The high-reared soul he humbles, stealing even the assent of his pure and unsuspecting mind, and then blinding his eyes to his inevitable fate.

Nothing can foil, resist, escape the influence of this remorseless spirit. No one can cope with his knowledge, or counterplot his craft, or check his resentments and revenges. Not Cassio or Othello or Desdemona any more than Roderigo—ay! not even Emilia who should know him best. The best with the worst unconsciously conspire with him to ruin their own peace. They are all supremely foolish, over-credulous, almost preternaturally subservient to his evil will; at least they are too easily imposed on, one were apt to think, by glozing lies and specious promises and looks as false as hell itself, were it not too plainly true that in the history of human deception, from Satan down to Mephistopheles, no "likeness of man's enemy"—to adopt Mr Swinburne's words—"could be matched for danger and for dread against the good bluff soldierly trustworthy figure of honest Iago." His superior mental capabilities, his extraordinary arts of dissimulation, his daring and cunning and reputed honesty—are not these things which, existing in active combination, without any relaxation of one separate faculty or any divergence from the chief purpose of his life, might naturally enough enable a man to ensnare beings even more circumspect than Othello, Desdemona, and Cassio are, and better armed against cunning and deceit than they?

All things are therefore at risk before this man; all creatures in utmost danger that come within his sphere. What avails it to fight against the laws of such a mind as this? Everywhere his evil affections will embody themselves; at every turn *his* sin will bedaub his neighbour. The noble, upright, great-minded Moor will become first eavesdropper, then murderer, at his bidding. The scatter-brained Roderigo will take the word from him and strike aimlessly at the unoffending lieutenant. Without any misgiving Cassio himself will enter the trap that Iago holds open for him, and, in imploring the good offices of the General's wife, will lead to his own undoing. The loose, frivolous, but kind-hearted Emilia holds in her hand the one last link in that chain of forged evidence with which her crafty husband contrives eventually to circumvent the innocent Desdemona, and even she will part with it, suspecting nothing, anxious only "to please his fantasy." They do not know themselves why they trust him; but they *do* trust him![1] And so everywhere you behold him successfully tempting, ensnaring, betraying; overcoming all difficulties and surmounting all obstacles; ruthlessly rejoicing in every bitter thought, in every destructive passion, in every despairing pang; with no voice of conscience and no sting of human feeling to restrain him in his unwearied pursuit of that power which is evil and destroys like some Sarsar wind of death, with no element of goodness at all in himself to quench that guilty thirst of possession that, keen and heavy as the fire of frost, eats in upon his own callous soul.

Iago thirsts for approbation. And the sense of his own inferiority is borne in upon him. He respects virtue, as all devils do. But he is conscious of his own incapacity to love what is noble for its own sake: that feeling which alone ennobles human excellence and really raises his envied companions so immeasurably above him. His mind, in short, sickens at the sight of purity. For he has, so to speak, squeezed all the genial and generous sap of humanity out of his nature. And the influence of such sunbright happiness as that which Othello and Desdemona mutually enjoy

[1] See some excellent remarks on this point (although I do not altogether agree with them) by A. Mezières in 'Shakespeare, ses Œuvres et ses Critiques,' 278-281.

from day to day is therefore to a diseased heart such as his, as the influence of light upon a diseased eye. Pain and vexation give place to an inexorable and imperturbable hardness, to an invincible malevolence which desires not so much that all that so plainly differs from himself should be reduced to a lower level; that those whom he hates should lose some prized possession, or those whom he envies should discover the shadowy hollowness of their boasted bliss, as that all around him should once and for ever become unmixed weakness, discord, darkness, misery, and guilt. I have already illustrated this characteristic by allusion to that speech of vainglorious ferocity which he makes when contemplating the meeting of the wedded lovers after the sea-voyage. Let me only add here, as a necessary preliminary to the consideration of the question of motive, that the sentiment embodied in the speech furnishes us with an important clue to the character.

He well knows that, do what he will to destroy the physical happiness and moral beauty which he observes with such vindictive malice, there is still that within the bosom of his victims which somehow defies the devilish arts of which he is master. But he also knows that by his craft and cunning, by his cold and penetrating sagacity, he can make semblance pass for substance; that he can make virtue pass for vice; that he will be able to distort and pervert even the "blessed conditions" of Desdemona, and turn her conduct wrong side out; so that what was strength before will sink into weakness, what was happiness before will degenerate into a gnawing misery, what was pure and lovely and of good report before will be transformed into a terrible guilty thing which will call for judgment and at which the sense will ache, and what was once a noble presence that all men reverenced will become "the fixed figure for the time of scorn to point his slow and moving finger at." And how does he propose to bring about a mischief so widespread and so terrible? By his unparalleled proficiency in the fine art of lying, to which all his logic, learning, wit are made subservient! This is the malicious potency of his subtle and adaptive intellect—that has altogether ceased to think truly—to which he trusts. He has what Bacon

was wont to call a natural though corrupt love of the lie itself. He cannot, and indeed he would not though he could, reclaim his tongue from the detestable trick of lying. This is the one great fact that appears with ominous distinctness through the fog of his evil affections. Iago is a living lie!

III.

And not only so; but he is the worst of all possible liars—a liar to self. Therefore the envy and the jealousy which he drags into his discourse by the shoulders and suggests as the occasion of his hatred, must be taken as mere subterfuges. It is impossible to accept them as the primary and original, still less as the *only* impelling motives of his action. I simply regard them as abortive births of an intellectual instinct hopelessly vitiated and debased; farther proofs of that perverted judgment which invents evil haphazard in order either to justify or cloak the sin, the practice of which has already grown congenial.

Iago indeed only "half tries to make himself half believe" that Cassio and Othello have both wronged him in a double sense; and he no sooner advances these reasons than he dismisses them as mere pretences after all. He has in point of fact no cause for revenge. There is no moral ground for his jealousy. Disappointment of itself would scarcely incite him to such terrible resentment. His malice, in fine, is plainly out of all proportion to motives such as those which he suggests, and which, therefore, I reject as being merely the rampant offshoots of his nimble but implacable logic—what Hugo quaintly calls the "sinister fisticuffs of Satan against God." For he is himself only too well aware of the motivelessness of his great revenge even whilst thus reasoning with his own soul. The one intellectual feat indeed which he finds himself unequal to is the invention of a motive commensurate with the "monstrous birth" which he has conceived in his unholy mind. As a liar he is not so successful perhaps with himself as with others. This is a slender humanising trait which one can gladly welcome!

Several reasons, it is true, suggest themselves, but they are dismissed as insufficient. Yet unmoved by any remonstrance he "will do as if for surety"; showing clearly that an innate fiendishness of disposition, and an insatiable pride of intellectual mastery, rather than any outside cause operating against himself, have mutually led to the creation of that revengeful impulse by which he is remorselessly swayed. He who suspects impurity is prurient. And because of the tendency of his mind to reverse all moral distinctions, and so bring the virtuous under the dismal influence of which himself is the willing slave, Iago's suspicions are commonly and knowingly ill-founded, if not always and absolutely untrue. The rotten fruit is sweet only to the worm; the acrid dust to the serpent with its withered lung; the lie to the coward who stabs in the dark; and, in the language of Bacon, "whoso is out of hope to attain to another's virtue, will seek to come at even hand by depressing another's fortune."

But the two self-assigned reasons for Iago's course of conduct may here be separately and more closely considered for a moment. Rival success is certainly a "crime" which disappointed emulation will seldom forgive. And therefore Iago, knowing his price as the approved soldier, may naturally enough feel some resentment that the "counter-caster" Cassio, who has "never set a squadron in the field," should be preferred before him. He has coveted a post, and has failed to obtain it. His pride is thereby hurt and his rebellious and murmuring ambition is checked. His disappointment acts as a stimulant to the moral disease from which he suffers: forces on, that is, rather than creates the hatred which is already operating in his malignant nature against the Moor; and at the same time inspires him with malice against the object of the coveted preferment, whom he also resolves to entrap and ruin whilst using him as an unconscious but—though he regards him in general as a tender weakling—*important* auxiliary here in the carrying out of his larger villainy.

He thus adds crime to crime, not so much for any new profit to be gained, or because it was part of his original scheme, but simply for the sake of doing evil. His mind, like Nature, abhors a vacuum. He pines for adventure; and with the characteristic

sophistry of the born sceptic, fears the atrophy of his faculties by disuse: fancying, that is, that by freshness of action, even evil action, he will be able to retain, or bring himself back to soundness of mind. Whilst therefore there is here a probable or plausible ground for action, there is in reality no actual moral ground which in other circumstances could independently have stimulated and forced the action on. The slight implied in Othello's choice of Cassio for the lieutenancy, and the envy excited by Cassio's success, do not furnish the real motives of his conduct. Had thwarted ambition or envy, and the hatred thus and thereby engendered, been the true and prevailing emotions of this soldier's heart, would he not naturally—as the hare-brained Roderigo himself suggested—have abandoned the service of the Moor? But instead of that he declares with the utmost candour that he follows him only to serve his turn upon him. He accepts his lot as "the curse of service" against which he asserts "*there's no remedy.*" He cannot mend his own case; but he can impair that of another. That is his rendering of the *Dura est conditio servorum.* And so he reaffirms his hatred of the Moor, which points, I think, to the conclusion that some cause antecedent to these events may naturally be inferred.

From his after speeches he would have it appear that jealousy is the joint or alternative cause. But, having suggested this possible grievance, he immediately says,—

> "I know not if 't be true,
> But I, *for mere suspicion* in that kind,
> Will do as if for surety."

This does not savour of jealousy. There is no regret for the Past, no faintest present trace of injured pride, no restless heart-sinking dread of the Future. There is no sign of anger even arising from the mere Draconian and material idea that he has been robbed of rights which must be summarily vindicated, and that his authority has been so defied as to call for instant vengeance. There is a total absence of all excitability. He gravely contemplates that which would inflame to madness the mind of most men, if honestly believed or clearly proved. He

is coldly severe or inexplicably *insouciant* in respect of that which, borne in upon another heart, even as a painful surmise, would have led to inconsolable sorrow or resulted in incurable despair.

And so I take it that his words amount simply to a suspicion evolved spontaneously from the cold dry impurity of his own false mind. He delights to pass it in review as a mere possibility that tends to sharpen his inventive faculties or amuse his reasoning powers. It whets his revenge, and tickles his fiendish soul, where love and honour are not, into a fresh transport of jubilant ferocity. He is passionless himself. But he nevertheless loves to contemplate those things which act upon others as the most potent provocatives of passion. These things serve as the *palæstra*, so to speak, for reinvigorating his intellectual strength and skill; for increasing the forces of an imagination already by nature sufficiently fertile and athletic, but on which, as he well knows, so much still depends. Like Mr Browning's Caliban, in short, he "taketh his mirth with make-believes." This musk-grain of sardonic humour flavours his vengeance: impregnates it with an odour eminently seductive to his evil-scenting nostrils, which, with oxlike obstinacy, refuse to be ashamed.

If jealousy there be, it is only a morbid *jealousy of jealousy:* a fear, that is, lest a mere domestic thing like this which, if absolutely true, would most likely have been of little or no consequence to him—for Emilia has plainly outlived his fancy—should interfere with the fixed purpose of his revenge which he has resolved on without regard to any such idea. Where will is to rule supreme it is essential that he should concentrate his mind. He feels certain of success provided no object or emotion intervenes to distract his attention or unbend the fixity of his first resolve.

His triumph, observe, consists not in making pitch look blacker, but in converting virtue into pitch, in making goodness look vile and vicious. Eve fell because she attempted to transform the forbidden into the permitted fruit. But to make the permitted fruit of friendship and compassionate interest appear in Desdemona's case the forbidden fruit of lust—this, I say, was to

form Iago's triumph.[1] It is not his "fool" of a wife, therefore, whom he wishes to convict and punish. It is no illicit love of hers that he wishes to revenge. He would have us believe that he already suspects that she bears resemblance to those other wives of Venice who, loving voluptuous ease and pleasures that are contraband, "let Heaven see pranks they dare not show their husbands." And the suspicion neither irritates nor enrages him. He regards it with the utmost indifference and complacency. But it is the heavenly innocent Desdemona whose "parts and graces" he determines to smirch and blacken. He shows the utmost indifference towards his own wife, so that jealousy is an emotion which is wholly irreconcileable with his whole course of action, not to say quite incompatible with a character that is absolutely loveless. For where there is no love, and where there is even no tender or decent solicitude manifested towards the supposed object of it, jealousy, properly so called, cannot exist. Love, which is normally a prerequisite of jealousy, implies a vivid delight in the contemplation of the object of it, and an ardent desire of good to that object — things, I need hardly say, which are only conspicuous by their entire absence in the character of Iago. We may therefore safely conclude, I think, that what he says in this regard is also a lie: a lie as palpable as his professed *penchant* for Desdemona herself, a feeling to which he inclines, he tells us, partly with the view of feeding his revenge.

For observe further, there is no indication whatever in the gradual development of his character of any abrupt transition from good to bad. He is plainly incapable of passionate conversion except in one direction—from one degree of wickedness, that is, to another, deeper and darker still. As the horrors accumulate he expands; as the moral gloom increases, his wit brightens; when others grow austere and awestruck, he becomes joyful and self-confident. He follows unintermittingly the bias of his evil inclinations. You nowhere behold him trembling on the quivering border-line of good and evil like Faustus, with whom and Iago there is some slight shred of parallelism. For both voluntarily

[1] See Hudson *ut supra*, ii. 471.

surrender their souls to sin; both yield gladly to evil for sake of the pleasure it affords; both are consummate atheists of human virtue, of goodness and truth and an hereafter. Iago is of course the Mephistopheles of Othello,—the tempter, not the tempted. But a contrast between him and the hero of the medieval legend will best illustrate my meaning.

See, then, the difference between these two sin-smitten souls. Faustus, unlike Iago, shows some slight vacillation of purpose. The Ancient would have sneered at the Teuton as too "severe a moraler." For, though hopelessly beguiled by the devil, Faustus is still swayed to and fro by the giddy pleadings of conscience. Ever and again the half-muffled reverberations of inner discord reach our ears. The pain of moral dislocation racks his soul. He delights in the pursuit of pleasure-giving sin; but gradually atheism gives way to the impotence of faith, and he grieves to think of Hell. Now his brooding thoughts are dissipated or deadened by pleasure, and again his mirth is tempered by vague remorse, and his curiosity startled by appalling certainties. There is, in fine, despite the fatal compact and the complete surrender of his own will, a visible trembling on that tragic border-line which separates good from evil and desire from indulgence. Ultimately a complete transformation of thought and feeling and desire takes place. Through fear he manifests a disposition to "renounce this magic," which is capable of satisfying his every wish. He would even repent. But the thought is instantly abandoned because, conscious of his permanent dissimilarity of feeling with God, and unable—so enfettered is he to the fiend—to abjure his impious renunciation of Him, he *cannot* repent. The bad advice of Mephistopheles has ruined an immortality; constant sinning has destroyed the very faculty for repentance; his protracted separation from the good and the true has extinguished the very power and capacity to attain even a predominant *desire* to be holy; and fearful voices therefore thunder in his affrighted ears that he is damned! He would weep, but the devil draws in his tears. He would express his sorrow and contrition and give a name to that dread horror that has seized his soul; but the devil cripples and cramps his tongue into speechless impotence. He

would in piteous supplication lift up lame hands of dim reviving faith and grope his way out of the enshrouding darkness; but Lucifer and Mephistopheles hold them down with a cruel and invincible grip. He would fain leap up at last to God out of the maddening torment and tumult that vexes and harries his frenzied soul to find the peace that he has impiously forsworn; but he is held down by that ruthless and remorseless Power to whom he has sold it, and "Faustus *must* be damned." Such is the lurid and Dantesque picture—made beautiful and piteous with mourning and desire, with eager demands and eager surrenders—which Marlowe gives us of one who has voluntarily taken evil for his good. Through all its sublimely conceived horrors, and dark and pitiable as is the gloom that finally settles down upon it, there is still discernible a faint and wavering trace of the after-glow of a noble soul whose sun has set; of a life of highest moral promise, with its "sparkles of a better hope," that has become imbruted and eclipsed.

But in the case before us there are no such signs and no such tokens. Shakespeare's conception of a sin-blind soul is vastly different: infinitely truer to the teachings of religion and the moral experiences of human life. There is no such visible alternation between day and night in Iago's grim bat-like soul. His voracious animosity is stimulated and strengthened by a heedless obstinacy that forces him constantly into new paths of crime. And as Philoxenes of old longed for a crane's neck so that he might enjoy at greater length the pleasures of the table, so Iago yearns for opportunities to do evil, and laments that he sometimes lacks iniquity to do him *better* service.[1] He gives no sign of reversion from one temper to its opposite—from passionate love, that is, to implacable vengeance; but appears at the early age of twenty-eight as a being who seems to have lived continually in diabolical, sensual, and Satyric conditions of thought; and who, contentedly taking evil for his good and subordinating everything to the corrupt instincts of his half-animal life and the egoistic lust of his pestilent brain, has ever found until now that his black desires and devilish projects outran his opportunities, rather than one

[1] See Act i. sc. 2, l. 3.

who, simply adopting in ignorance or through force of circumstances, wild notions and lawless principles into his system of practical ethics, has gradually drifted down into that state of brutal transfiguration of the whole character which you have exhibited, for example, in the case of the young gipsy son of Effie Deans in Scott's 'Heart of Mid-Lothian.'

Besides, whilst Iago suspects that Cassio and the Moor have both worn his night-cap, nothing occurs from beginning to end either as regards the manner, words, or actions of the parties implicated that is calculated to give the least colour of truth or moral ground to the suspicion. It does not appear as a *fact;* and it is even virtually negatived as a *probability*. The suggestion simply supplies another cogent proof in support of what he confesses—in the hope, however, that the credulous Moor will here regard it as a lie—that he is apt by nature to "shape things that are *not*." And this expedient was adopted by our poet and variously illustrated, we may surmise, in order to emphasise and darken the character of Iago whose falsity is so ingrained that he can complacently lie to his own secret soul; and to suggest what Coleridge with profound insight has finely described as "the motive-hunting of a motiveless malignity."

IV.

Now such a view as that which I have here taken is, I think, in perfect accordance with our knowledge of human nature. There are crimes committed and wrongs done which have no discoverable motive; which must, in fact, be referred to the original malignity of the wrong-doer. There are persons born in whom there is demonstrably not only an extreme deficiency or a serious perversion, but an entire absence of moral sense—a state of mental organisation which really determines their destiny. To such persons crime presents itself as a sort of outlet for their unsound tendencies—a channel through which their diseased intellectual activities operate. They would go mad in all probability if they were not criminals; and they do *not* go mad simply

because through this natural moral perversion or total want of ethical principle they *are* criminals. In addition to what is commonly understood as insanity—that is, *intellectual* insanity: a perversion of *reason* which implies a deviation of the mental faculties from an assumed normal standard—there is known to exist a form of insanity which is described as *moral insanity* (*mania sine delirio*) which, irrespective of any determinate intellectual aberration or disturbance, simply reveals itself in a disordered or perverted state of the inclinations, passions, emotions, temper, and feelings.

And it is important to remember here that this morbid perversion of the moral sentiments has two common if not invariable forms of manifestation. It either displays itself in the shape of a causeless suspicion or jealousy, or a motiveless hatred of those towards whom the person so affected should in justice show the utmost loyalty and devotion; or else it manifests itself in the form of a wild, reckless, cruel disposition towards mankind in general.[1] There is infallibly such a thing as incapacity of melioration: a state of absolute alienation of the moral sense—what Emerson, if I mistake not, has described as the only mortal distemper.

The absence of all motive, properly so called, does not therefore presuppose an impossible being. Neither does the theory for which I have here contended, that there may be final permanence of evil character with a will that is absolutely free, involve a psychological self-contradiction. The very doing of a thing brings into operation an acquired force. What is actively commenced is often passively continued. Sin produces in a man a species of intellectual somnambulism in which he sees for ever the "damned spot" of an irreversible Past—the centre of gravity in the Devil's world which draws all future actions towards itself. It possesses and holds him fast. And so sin, like every other event of human history, repeats itself. From the depths of the unknown, new forces that silence the pleadings of conscience come in upon him. The evil that perhaps has sunk for a period into latency is revived and reproduced, like a language learned in childhood, mysteriously

[1] See Dr Maudsley's 'Responsibility in Mental Disease;' and Dr Taylor's 'Medical Jurisprudence,' 619, 620.

forgotten, and suddenly recalled; or, as in the case of the automatic recollection and reproduction of a series of sounds heard mechanically, he takes up the chain of corrupt ideas and acts upon the original abnormal impulse that was interrupted by the transient interval of moral sanity; and, by the operation of these acquired forces, he persists in evil even when there is no longer any definite object.

It is even probable, I think, that every sensation we experience, every desire and affection of our hearts, every judgment of our minds, every moral emotion of our souls, preserves an indefinite aptitude for spontaneous revival. Dreams forgotten when awake are often recalled in a new state of sleep. Images and phantom recollections will, to use Wordsworth's phrase, sometimes leap spontaneously

"From hiding-places ten years deep."

And so sin, forborne for a season simply from lack of opportunity, recurs with added strength when those circumstances most favourable to its growth are again repeated. One sin not only suggests another, but, like dream delivering us to dream, secretly opens the way for it. Once the fierce door is opened, motives, like dream-faces *never seen and never to be known*, sneak in to breed desire and form a habit and compel the self-deluded soul to continue what is—apart from its own gratification—henceforward without an aim. It is a wise and pregnant saying that of Sadi: "Do not conclude that the thicket is unoccupied; peradventure the tiger is gone asleep."[1]

It is certain that no power within or without can prevent the thought from reverting to its own ideal. And when the ideal is bad it is uniformly found that the circumstances and motives which are urged in defence of those actions by which it is objectified have no essential relation to the primary impulse, to which, however, as after-thoughts, they may still lend an additional force. For motives grow out of character and do not make it. New actions are only the explanation of old ones; and circum-

[1] See 'The Gulistan, or Flower-Garden,' of Shaikh Sadi (edit. 1823), chap. i. apologue 3.

stances only master a man when his will has yielded to them. An evil heart can always defy culture, and work in spite of circumstance. Shakespeare to the last believed not only in the potential angel in a man, but in "a born devil, on whose nature nurture can never stick."[1] The vital force of a man's being—that is, the man himself—may be wholly absorbed by evil. His talents become enfettered, and he must move as it dictates. It becomes a passion from which deliverance is impossible. For remember there is always a terrible physiological element underlying our moralities. There are deep, incalculable instincts, the heritage of past generations, which suddenly declare themselves. There is a despotism of race which tyrannises over character: blind motions in man's blood that puddle his spirit: torrents of tendency in his soul which drive it from the moral towards the material pole; secret currents in the tide of thought which give to every impulse of the mind and to every affection of the heart a permanent moral bias. Neither gospel nor constitution, self-reliance nor culture, nor hell-fire itself can quench these fateful currents. A tiny plug might have stopped the leak at the dam-head; but once the flood has got full vent, and broken through the dams of early piety and purity, and over the lower dykes of prudence and self-restraint, neither Mount Sinai nor the Hill of Calvary will keep it back!

These tragedies which deal with the infinite issues of life and death are written by one who firmly believes in the irreparable, irreversible issues of evil deeds. Sin, according to the Shakespearian ethic, is self-propagating. Its continuance precludes the possibility of repentance. And when, as is the case here, the disarrangement of the soul becomes so complete as to amount to total dissimilarity of feeling with God, it inevitably leads to what I have called the final permanence of free evil character. Even Omnipotence cannot force blessedness on a certain type of character. And Iago who has massacred every holy motive in

[1] See "The Tempest," iv. 1, 188 *seq.* In "Richard III." (i. 3, 229, 230) you have a similar passage:—

> "Thou that wast seal'd in thy nativity
> The slave of nature and the son of Hell."

his soul is a singular morbid instance of this momentous truth. With him evil only is power; and the attainment of that which he alone values is not to be repented of. In a word, there is unquestionably such a thing as destiny without a cure. And it is into this condition that Iago has drifted.

> "Sin, death, and hell, have set their marks on him;
> And all their ministers attend on him." [1]

But, whilst conceding this much, it may be objected that without some strong motive at the outset of his career it would have been impossible for him to have reached such depths of iniquity. My answer to that is, that except in so far as evil is in itself a motive, Iago is destitute of any. The wickedness, too, which he has already accomplished, serves at every stage of his career as a pretext or motive for that evil which it is still in his power to do. The more he advances the worse he becomes. Success is the potent opiate with which the devil drugs the sinner's soul!

As the god of this world is a jealous god, he will concede nothing to the compromises of an imperfect realisation. He likes "the word" to be followed by "the deed": that is the principle laid down in the popular version of the Faust story; but he is satisfied only with a permanent tendency, not with an *isolated* deed. "Neck or nothing" is the motto that o'ertops the blazon of devilhood. And so a ferocious Myself—an inflamed individualism—is the inevitable issue and outcome of all his teaching. The "hypertrophy of the Ego" indeed is the moral disease on which Satan has always relied since it crushed out God from his own presumptuous and rebellious soul.

Iago, then, visibly swells with this sense of a stupendous self that is fit to dwarf the world. Every new success excites afresh the impatience of vanity; each effect strengthens every other, and causes him to expand. Power, limitless as the mind, is that at which he aims. A personal ascendancy is with him the only thing worth aiming at. The subordination of all things within the sphere of his activities to one—his own prideful intellect; the lust for sovereignty that will raise him to a sort of godhood;

[1] "King Richard III.," i. 3, 293.

—this is the fatal lure to which Iago's soul, ravished with its own conceit, has wildly stooped. And thus, difficult as it may be to explain, we discover on reflection a sufficiency of motive. But it is a motive which is essentially inherent in evil itself. The dynamic or motive-power of the wicked and anarchic nature is simply this inextinguishable thirst for power which so distinguishes Iago. The whole faculties of his nature, which is absolutely devoid of spiritual cravings, sensibilities, and checks, are directed to the acquisition of power; an excess of self-love is the principle of all his conduct, the element that infects all his actions. Born under the causality of good he has voluntarily and unreservedly transferred himself over to the causality of evil, and formed the fearful resolve to find in his own lawless spirit the one absolute motive of action. In effect he has whispered to his perverted soul, "Evil, be thou my good!" Without reverence for God or man, he is the type of pure intelligence divorced from feeling and sympathy. He is the supreme Egotist: what every man *may* become who seeks to live only for himself.

V.

But at this point difficulties arise which must be fairly met, and questions suggest themselves which must be honestly answered. The psychology of this wonderful creation yet remains to be described: the doctrine of his spiritual nature demands a fuller exposition. I have still to indicate the process by which Iago has reached this state of final permanence of free evil character.

Impulses, then, are commonly divided into three classes—Desires, Affections, Judgments: the craving, the giving, the persuading powers. These are represented as indicating the emptiness of man's nature, the fulness of his nature, and the faculty of discrimination implanted therein for the purpose of moral self-guidance.[1] The distinctive features of these separate

[1] See Professor Calderwood's 'Moral Philosophy,' 1878, Part ii. chap. i. § 6.

forms of impulse are immutable. They cannot, that is, be merged in each other. But they are capable of being blended in a single mental state.

And this latter condition is that which I consider meets and describes the case in point. In Iago all these forms of impulse are blended into a single mental state. He has massacred in his soul the desire to be pure. His affections are estranged from holiness. By his own creative operation he has destroyed all moral principle and lost all faculty for equitable judgment. Just as Charles IX. of France, in order to relieve himself from the consequences of Coligny's murder, commanded the total extermination of the Huguenots, so that not one might be left in France to reproach him,—thus bringing about the Saint Bartholomew massacre; so Iago, by sheer force and tenacity of will, has shut up all "access and passage to remorse" so that none of those holier or worthier motives and principles which belong to Humanity might enter his soul to accuse or torment or drive him from his fell and fiendish purpose.

And the final permanence of evil character which he reaches is produced by the unbroken unity in immoral action of all the desires, affections, and judgments of his nature. Iago is the absolute of egoism: a logical life issuing in moral death; one that refuses to be analysed by addition or subtraction and demands to be taken as a whole. Hegel affirmed that evil must be regarded as "a negative element," so that this enormous fulness may justly be looked upon as in reality implying emptiness: the *inmost self* is empty, wretched, shrivelled, dead in sin. Not by consideration, then, of separate faculties, but by viewing the spirit through which these operate, as a whole, must the nature and actuating principle of Iago be determined. And this for obvious reasons.

The faculties and forces of the Ego are simply the Ego itself: the person, the soul, the spirit. Here, therefore, we must lay aside words and literary metaphors that are only employed for convenience of discourse, such as reason or intelligence, will or personal power, which are not in reality satisfactions but suggestions. For these forces and faculties do not denote any occult

essence, but are directly derived from itself; and in their active exercise they produce a psychological unity which is nothing more than a harmony and effect. To ascribe events and actions exclusively to will or reason or any other individual faculty, is something like attributing to the waves the morning and evening librations of the sea. It is a vain and deluding mental fiction to give substantive names to the imperial faculties of the soul: a false and sophistical method to appeal at pleasure from one faculty to another which claims to be of higher validity and of greater force as an impulse to action, at different times and under varying circumstances.

For who can set a limit to the human soul? All that remains of a man are his resolutions and events with their conditions and dependences—successive components, that is, of himself—which beget delight, affection, aptitudes. These, from their continual repetition, grow into persistent habits which ultimately cohere in a steadfast or permanent character. To attempt to inventory his faculties is to aim at the impossible. But to classify and analyse his events is not only possible but profitable. For in these a man's true power lies imprisoned. You may call the mind a volatile essence if you will; but these are its precipitations which you may sift and test, measure and weigh. Results are above the influence of Chance and are determined by Law. Actions betray the ill-concealed soul, and are always tinged with its colour. As parts, indeed, of the psychological individual, they are rudimentary souls in different degrees of development: landmarks of the moral universe faithful as fixed stars in the firmament above us: points of departure which never quite deceive or fail us.

For moral as well as physical law has unity and universality. It is made tangible not only in us but by us. Soul speaks to soul with emphasis in the daily beauty or deformity of outward life; and declares by every action whether it is well or ill. It is Shakespeare's deliberate conviction that "things outward do draw the inward quality after them."[1] And although we cannot read the dark Cassandra meanings of that inner tragedy of thought

[1] "Antony and Cleopatra," Act iii. sc. 12, l. 32.

from which the outward actions are evolved, we can at least discover a primitive disposition and a supreme tendency; and from these extracts and fragments and solemn trifles of the Ego which are visible and indestructible and run into the organisation of moral character as parts and properties of a natural whole, we can detect the absence or the presence of the divine sentiment within the sphere of intentions.

Each resolution and each act is in turn the Ego, the phase in which the whole nature appears when manifesting itself ethically. And the attempt, founded on a metaphysical illusion, to isolate by abstraction the moral consciousness of mankind, and, denoting its existence by the substantive name of "conscience," to treat it as a separate faculty, is the best possible illustration of the danger attending this convenient but pernicious habit of separating the Ego and its faculties. The Ego is a being, a product formed of many variously elaborated materials; and the *act* is, so far, the *man*—not the effect of anything external to him, but simply the externisation of his powers, capacities, and faculties which concur in the formation of the Ego. "Vice" and "Virtue" according to worldly ethics, or "sin" and "holiness"—to use the prevailing terms of Christian ethics—are the products of this product. And therefore from a study of a man's successive events with their conditions and dependences, which alone are real because they are the necessary embodiment of his spiritual nature, rather than from any consideration of such metaphysical phantoms and mysterious agents as affinities, occult qualities, appetites and energies, a human personality which we can grasp, name, and classify almost with the minuteness and accuracy of science, will present itself to our judgment.

Whence it follows, that when a man's actions are constantly and radically evil, it may be asserted, that as each external event has a constant connection with some internal event, the Spirit which these events and actions embody is wholly perverted. For our emotions and volitions are only the affective or impulsive and active side of our ideas; the extract or elements of our SELF. In every action that is worth noting there is an intellectual quality; and, "whatever be the origin of a judgment, the attribute is

always, in relation to the subject, an artificial fragment in relation to a natural whole."[1]

Michael Angelo, old and blind, feeling a headless and limbless statue in the Vatican can within himself repiece the fragments and renew the symmetry of the long-lost parts; and, in the magical light there shining, estimate, without surplus or deficiency, what the plan of this world-worn Torso *must* have been as a perfect whole. So here with Iago we are enabled to determine from the fragmentary parts what "the native act and figure" of his heart—or in other words, his being as a whole—*must* inevitably be. His words "I am not what I am" help us, like the frayed and broken places in the marble trunk, to recreate the normal structure of the image: in the fixed untrembling framework of events we discover a statue of his soul.

In other words, by doing his own peculiar work he unfolds himself. We have not the whole of his thought; but we have sufficient to render a true and definite judgment possible. The physical event *translates* the mental event, and every unexplored remainder of his moral nature. His desires, affections, judgments resolving themselves into a continuous web of events, each event being the condition of another, and having another as *its* condition again,—the soul of one event, as it were, transfusing itself into the soul of the other—are the infallible interpreters of his moral nature, of the Ego as a whole, which, unique and persistent, remains one and continuous, howsoever artful and transient may be its ever-varying manifestations. These impulses, to which I have alluded above as belonging to the nature of man, are here simply ancillary forces which must inevitably follow *him*.

With these ethical materials or events, then, fragments and extracts of the Ego, we are enabled in some measure to reconstruct the psychological individual. Through a physical and social medium we acquire some definite knowledge of his moral and mental states. We discern the aptitudes and tendencies which were effective and preponderant in all the processes of his mind and heart; and recognise the general inclinations which

[1] See M. Taine's work 'On Intelligence' (1871), Book ii. chap. i. § 6; and Book iv. chap. iii. § 1.

determined the direction of all his actions *without* during those moral transformations and revolutions which have taken place *within*. We arrive at a primitive disposition, a certain original malignity of nature which has produced forces, magnitudes, and directions — a close-drawn network of unholy principles and purposes centring in Self; and which, by degrees, has moulded the character and stamped it with the seal of permanence. For events are conservative as well as creative. Their constant procession leads to permanence in the end; and "wild liberty breeds iron conscience."

From general laws we can thus deduce particular laws. Therefore I now propose to apply these thoughts more directly to the question of motive which weighs so heavily with some.

Mediately or immediately, then, deliberate action is necessarily directed to something which is selected for itself alone. But this something may either be *itself an action* or an *object*. Man *must* act from motive, because that is at once the condition and result of free agency. For the necessity of the will constitutes the only freedom. And any action performed without a motive would simply imply a movement under the might of an irresistible Necessity such as that which works through the fateful sublimities of the Attic tragedy.

But motive is an internal force. Sir William Hamilton calls it "a mental tendency" which impels to action, either internal or external;[1] and the inbred desire for the free indulgence of malice, or the impulse to destroy, which is the actuating principle of the anarchic nature, forms of itself a motive of undoubted sufficiency. A man's morals are simply his *mores* or habits; and his previous actions form the mainspring of the motives from which his future conduct is certain to proceed.

And this, I think, meets the case here. The alternatives of action and object are combined in one supreme tendency predetermined to a certain issue which it is the purpose of the drama to reveal. Iago's will prescribes an action with reference to a definite end, the nature of which he frankly discloses in the first act, thereby revealing to us not his actual motives but the salient

[1] Reid's Works, 608.

features of his own nature and the feelings by which he is really moved towards mankind in general. Virtue is beauty. But that Iago lacks. Therefore he detests it whilst envying those who possess it. All goodness, in fact, is poison to his stomach. This also is an ever-present thought that "like a poisonous mineral gnaws his inwards." It impels him towards the only action of which he is capable. He secretly destroys, because, aware of his own deformity, he cannot rightly and openly govern. His dislocation and detachment from the life of God is that which makes him conscious of inward deformity. Of Cassio in particular, he says that he "hath a daily beauty in his life" *that makes him ugly*. Born sceptic as he is, he yet recognises the advantages of that virtue which still, as by an instinctual impulse, he madly scorns. He despises those who possess it, yet he knows that by reason of his own want of it he will never be able to gain a solid and lasting reputation.

His actions thus take their rise in Feeling, and are guided thereafter by his diseased yet masterful Intellect. His profuse unresting activity springs from inherent active power, with no determinable purpose at first but merely to expend itself.[1] His wicked wilfulness simply implies a will that will not give up what *it* wills; and for no other conceivable reason than that it is *it* that wills. For his pride of intellect has grown so lawless that he has absolutely and for ever refused allegiance to the moral reason. And, at once fettered and free,—fettered, that is, by his needs and greeds; free, that is, in the selection and appropriation of the means to gratify these,—his will degenerates into a heedless and unhesitating *willingness to sin*, a deliberate choice and pursuit of wickedness. He negates the true, pure, beneficent, universal will, and affirms in its stead his own false, impure, maleficent, particular will. And the something towards which his deliberate action is directed or *willed* is the practice of evil which possesses a power of gratification inherent in itself—for there is undeniably an original malice in mankind which renders human misery in some measure diverting—and this evil, *selected for itself alone*, is

[1] See Professor Bain on the Will in 'Mind and Body: The Theories of their Relation,' 1878, 77 *seq.*

concentrated upon Othello as its special or primary *object*, from no feeling of revenge naturally provoked, but from the fact that he well knows that the noble and trustful Moor is a being on whom its tormenting, corrupting, and destructive activities may be most thoroughly and effectively exercised. Will here is not the source of power. It is simply an instrument of the disposition; the medium or faculty through which power operates. Will and power depend on the *nature* of the agent. The nature of the agent is the radical source of all moral actions. And the motive in every action for which a man is directly answerable is a desire for personal gain of some sort. The moral quality of the act depends on the character of the agent. For all moral action is simply an attempt after self-realisation. And having once said "Evil, be thou my good!" Iago's whole conduct is quite consistent with that criminal egotism and lawlessness of intellect and unquenchable thirst after self-realisation in unrighteousness which this audacious expression may be said to cover.

Nothing convinces me of the truth of this more than the statement which he makes to Roderigo in Act i. scene 3: "Let us be conjunctive in *our* revenge against him: if thou canst cuckold him, thou dost thyself a pleasure, me a sport." He hates the Moor. His cause is hearted. And he says to his dupe—knowing well the infamous lie—"thine hath no less reason." He thus makes a need felt in the heart of another which he is certain that he alone can satisfy. And he creates for himself at the same time that taste which alone can gratify him. In making himself "conjunctive" with Roderigo in a revengeful compact such as that which he devises, knowing full well that so far as this libidinous popinjay is concerned there can be no reasonable or moral ground for it, he virtually vetoes the theory that revenge pure and simple is, as the result of disappointment or injury, the actuating principle of his *own* conduct. I think that he here discloses the sole reason for all his diabolical machinations;—the sport, namely, which his morbid nature will derive from that spectacle of human misery which his craft and cunning will gradually produce. If Roderigo's revenge has no

less reason, has Iago's revenge, it may properly be asked, any *more* reason? Would the Ancient have made such a statement—the only and self-convicting inference deducible from which must have suggested itself even to the very dullest comprehension—to Roderigo, who, as he is ultimately obliged to confess, is not quite such a fool as he looks?[1]

In this sense, then, Iago has assuredly a motive. But it is one which presents itself to him *by necessity of the case;* and it manifestly involves him in a like necessity. Or, in other words, having fallen voluntarily into permanent dissimilarity of feeling with God, and acquired a predominant love of what He hates, he must as

[1] But did Iago at any time really regard Roderigo as a *fool* in the ordinary acceptation of that term? When the Scriptures call a man a fool the word signifies a villain. Perhaps this explains Iago's employment of the expression as regards Roderigo. In Deuteronomy xxii. 21, it is written "Because she hath wrought *folly* in Israel, to play the whore." Here plainly "folly" and "wantonness" or "unchastity" are synonymous terms. And in a precisely similar sense, and as showing how closely he followed the Biblical idiom, we find Shakespeare employing the expression in "Othello" (Act v. sc. 2): "She turned to *folly*, and she was a whore." Considering the licentious and lecherous character of this Paphian creature, may not Iago, who is himself passionless in this regard, intend to signify then his contempt of the inordinate sexual craving of his dupe who, in pursuance of his unlawful solicitation of the virtuous Desdemona, has parted with jewels which, according to his lax morality, "would half have corrupted a votarist," and wasted himself out of his means (iv. 2, 187 *seq.*); and who, whilst at last suspecting the scurviness of Iago's treatment, and believing that he has been "fobbed" (defrauded or cozened: see "Henry IV.," 1st Part, i. 2) in the business, still continues to confide in his betrayer, and obeys his fatal instructions to the letter? With Iago intellect is all in all. Passionate self-indulgence is not his *métier*. His is the very stoicism of sin; an energetic *acting against* passion. But with Roderigo sexual desire overrides Reason. And in this sense, and perhaps in this sense only, is he a "fool" in Iago's eyes. For though his words do not suggest any profundity of thought or betoken the possession of any very special gift, he is still confessedly a man of mettle, wit, and judgment (iv. 2); not an idealess or one-idea'd man. Had he been altogether a "fool," a mere shallow-brained nincompoop, Iago, the profound philosopher who is impatient of all fools and underlings, and who knows the value of time and words as well as money, would not have wasted a single argument upon him. But he treats him as an indispensable auxiliary who, if success is to be had, *must be prudently reasoned with*. He bears no resemblance whatever to the "gilded waterfly" Osric, whom Hamlet contemptuously satirises as a mere poltroon, "spacious in the possession of dirt"; and who is incontestably a *fool* in the popular sense.

by a necessity of his self-vitiated nature go on hungering and thirsting after *un*righteousness; acting always upon those motives from *within* which Kant calls the "actual prescripts of reason unto its own self;" and glorying in the free exercise of that invention which he himself confesses comes from his pate "as birdlime does from frize," and which he tells us "plucks out brains and all."[1]

Iago is not to be judged by the natural objective motive—the mere *allurement*, that is, of worldly power, or pride of intellectual mastery; or by the natural subjective motive—by which I mean his *appetite* that is made up of constitutional endowments and tendencies including ambition and lust of power. These things existed before his fortunes were linked with those of Othello. But he is to be judged by his *intention* which is afterwards wholly determined by himself; and, as an agreeable elective preference which takes evil for good and transforms the outward allurement into an infatuation that stultifies the mind, and the natural inward appetite into a particular habit that binds him to the earth as a slave of the soil, indicates the permanent innermost love of his soul that has only wanted opportunity or opposition to draw it forth.

Here, then, we have motive, not in the sense of *allurement* or *appetite*, but in the sense of *intention*. We have not to consider the objective natural motive or the subjective natural motive—that is, the outward allurement which may exist potentially when

[1] See Act ii. sc. 1, l. 127. The ethical student will not fail to remember an important passage in the 'Analogy' of Bishop Butler, in which the idea given above is illustrated, and a fine distinction drawn between practical habits and passive impressions. The passage to which I allude is in Part i. chap. v., and shows an obvious parallelism between his moral theory and that of Aristotle in 'The Nicomachean Ethics,' Book ii. chap. iv. It is as follows:—"In like manner as habits belonging to the body are produced by external acts, so habits of the mind are produced by the exertion of inward practical principles: *i.e.*, by carrying them into act, or acting upon them;—the principles of obedience, of veracity, justice, and charity. But going over the theory of virtue in one's thoughts, talking well, and drawing fine pictures of it, may harden the mind in a contrary course, and render it gradually more insensible: *i.e.*, form a habit of insensibility to all moral considerations. For from our very faculty of habits, passive impressions, by being repeated, grow weaker."

we have regard to his chagrin and irritation in the matter of the lieutenancy, or the inward appetite or lust which may possibly exist in a weak uncertain form when we remember that soliloquy in which, disclaiming any unlawful passion for Desdemona, he yet adds parenthetically, "though, peradventure, I stand accountant for as great a sin"—both forms of motive arising from inordinate ambition, moral insensibility, and love of display; but the secret motive or *intention*, which has been long nourished and fostered, to gain, even by the appropriation of the most wicked means and whenever a favourable opportunity occurs, the possession for which his soul hungers; the invincible resolution to spare nothing that opposes the free exercise of his intellectual power, or that threatens to balk or baffle him in the pursuit of that pleasure which has for its "peculiar end" the poisoning of man's delight and peace.

He is profligate; but his profligacy is simply cynicism sensualised. His philosophy is egoism, and only amounts to this that the perfection of human liberty is to enfranchise the human will from *absolute obedience* to the Divine. His science is crime, and it unfolds itself in unimaginable snares that make a daily tragedy of human life.[1] In principle, he perpetuates out of Paradise the very sin which Satan commenced within the same. He employs the powers of his subtle mind and the infinite resources of his insinuating speech to pervert truth and ruin a human soul. And so Shakespeare, in my opinion, by means of this marvellous creation in particular, but also, and no less so, by his extraordinary treatment of the ethical principle in every scene of the drama, elaborates *logically* but not *theologically* a doctrine of Satanic agency.

Iago's love of evil as the *motive* is certainly reflected in the personal enmity towards Othello which naturally springs from it as the *act*. But we are not to regard the act as the expression of the *nature of the motive*, but rather of the *nature of the agent* who is only suddenly impelled to put *himself* into operation. He simply gives free vent to the evil forces of his nature which meet actively and absorb quickly whatever comes to them as motive:

[1] See Guizot, 'Shakespeare et son Temps' (ed. 1852).

whatever is capable of forwarding his purposes, or promoting his own pleasure through the pain of another; and the volitions of his freedom no longer represent the effects of an impulse or motive, but a *character* produced by the changeless spirit of the man, by instincts which, biassed towards wickedness, constantly claim satisfaction, and continually objectify themselves in cruelties and crimes.

Iago foresaw the end before he seized upon the means. He only hunted for motives after his resolve had been formed and fixed in his mind. And so his whole course of conduct admits of a reasonable philosophic explication. For an end simply *realises* itself. Itself alone is. Through appropriation of the means a purpose makes itself end; and permanence of free evil character is produced by that self-propagating power of sin, whose effects our poet elsewhere describes as "the multiplying villainies of nature." Is not permanence, too—that word from which the charitable shrink affrighted when employed in this connection—simply a word of degrees after all? Shakespeare, who always regards the spiritual methods of man, and assents to that doctrine which is essentially the doctrine of the Bible and true reason, that God is in everything but the fallen freewill of sinful man, has in "Cymbeline" (iv. 2) given expression, I think, to this very idea of moral permanence being a progressive arrangement:—

> "His humour
> Was nothing but mutation; ay, and that
> From one bad thing to worse."

He who wills the *end*, let us remember, can usually contrive to will the *means*. To the lawless and anarchic nature motives are either of secondary consequence or of no consequence at all. The mask of the hypocrite may either conceal profound purposes or utter purposelessness. And what is at first instinctive may at length become a matter of deliberate choice. Iago's will can never, of course, be quite free from motives; but these motives —extremely small in themselves, like the regulating wheel in certain powerful machinery—are essentially creations of the will itself, and do not involve or presuppose any extraneous com-

pulsion from without. Serpent's eggs are hatched by the sun, and require no parental incubation. And, in respect of wickedness, the human will has infallibly a sort of solar self-culture of its own, the secret actions of instinct, ripened and matured by chance or circumstance, gradually and almost imperceptibly transforming themselves into the visible actions of volition.

VI.

But in all ethical inquiries the sure path is from the known to the unknown. The old logicians were wont to say *Omnis intuitiva notitia est definitio*; that is, a view of the thing itself is the best definition. I shall therefore now attempt to give textual proof in support of the theory which I have here ventured to advance.

Let us take the common division of impulses to action which I indicated at the commencement of the previous section, and see how, in the spirit of the foregoing criticism, Iago has become a mere intellectual animal; how all his impulses, in other words, have become blended in a single mental state.

I. We have first, then, the craving power of Desire, which is a force that impels him to draw into his possession what is calculated to give satisfaction to his nature. Its practical tendency is to absorb. And there are three things involved in and comprehended under it.

There is first *the consciousness of want.* For all moral motives are pre-eminently personal. Iago explicitly describes the character of this want. He says—"I lack iniquity sometimes to do me service." This is the plain unvarnished truth, although he is anxious that it should be taken as a piece of honest self-detraction. And in the course of the drama he explains the nature of the service the lack of improper means to further which he thus regrets:—

> "I'll have our Michael Cassio on the hip;
> Abuse him to the Moor in the rank garb—
> For I fear Cassio with my night-cap too—

Make the Moor thank me, love me, and reward me,
For making him egregiously an ass,
And practising upon his peace and quiet,
Even to madness."

Power to be illicitly acquired, and afterwards implacably directed towards an iniquitous end, is the object of his craving desire; sport and pleasure the rewards which he foresees. His morbid nature will derive satisfaction from the misery produced by the exercise of this power. What he cannot be he will endeavour to destroy by means of slanderous, murder-prompting lies, and base intrigues.

This lust of the brain then produces, secondly, a *consequent restlessness of nature.* Iago does not possess that supreme prerequisite of peace—love. Hence he is in a state of constant unrest. He abhors "prattle without practice," which forms, in his opinion, the sum of Cassio's soldiership. His "muse *labours*, but thus she is *delivered.*" He declares that "nothing can or shall content my soul, till I am even'd with him wife for wife," &c. And, having hit upon the means almost by a fortuitous chance,[1] he resolves that his device shall not be dulled by coldness or delay.

Finally, as regards the matter of Desire, there is an insatiable *longing for satisfaction.* This satisfaction of soul in and through evil is the master-thought of Marlowe's "Doctor Faustus." Voluntarily he surrenders his soul at the wile of the Devil in order to appease the relentless pricking of those extravagant and voluptuous desires which create in him an ineffable anguish. His pursuit of sinful pleasure is unwearied; his longing for satisfaction is impetuous and insatiable:—

"Had I as many souls as there be stars,
I'd give them all for Mephistophilis!"

Iago, shut out of the heaven of spirit, with more impious premeditation and wanton wilfulness, and with greater pride of intellect, gluts his appetite with diabolical undertakings which are entered on merely for the sake of acting; and he blinds

[1] See Act i. sc. 3, ll. 293 and 409.

himself to the inevitable issue of his life and conduct, which, on the contrary, is an ever-present thought in the soul of Faustus, who is also drawn hellwards by beguiling visions of omnipotence. This, perhaps, is most clearly revealed in the last soliloquy of Act ii.

II. This all-prevailing desire, then, presupposes the existence of a supreme Affection, which is the second form of impulse which falls to be noticed. Iago's affection reveals itself in the shape of an antipathy—an antipathy so energetic, remorseless, and motiveless as to amount, indeed, to the very fanaticism of mischief. He shows a cruel, reckless disposition towards mankind in general, albeit his evil inclinations are mainly directed against the Moor, whom he hates as he does hell-pains, thus proving that there is an ecstasy of wickedness as of goodness. The self-propagating power of habit, operating in the sphere of lawless and unholy affections, has placed the nature of things on the side of unrighteousness. His soul, which has been craving and ardently longing for harmony between itself and Circumstance, eagerly accepts the least external stimulus, and quickly expands into that life of widespread malice and mischief prepared and foreseen from the first. For the lower nature of appetite and desire seeks its sinister or sinful end blindly; gropes in the dark, blind as a bat, and stupid as a buzzard, always content to grasp instinctively at its destined satisfaction; and it is not conceivable that a hatred comparable only to the deep, eternal, bitter pains of Hell was the monstrous soul-birth of a single night.

III. And this supremacy of evil affection necessarily implies a total perversion of the moral sense. The Judgment is impaired by repeated acts of sin. And repeated sins again are the inevitable result of perverted judgment. Here, as always, cause and effect are the twin-births of one Fact. Richter has well said that "every action becomes more certainly an eternal mother than it is an eternal daughter."[1] In other and plainer words, a man becomes less sensitive to light the more he sins against it.

Iago has shut out Truth from the voluntary activities of memory and reflection as an unwelcome, because a painful, thing. Therefore those moral emotions which it was designed to strengthen

[1] 'Titan,' vol. i. cycle 105.

and nourish in the soul grow weaker, and those malignant desires and intentions which it was intended to repress and check grow stronger and more rampant, until a self-deceiving blindness of judgment and a self-destroying callousness of heart ensue.

The judgment of Prudence and the judgment of Rectitude are those judgments which take rank as impulses. The former is concerned with self-interest or expediency; and that of course, rather than what is concerned with rightness in disposition and conduct, is the judgment which, with the necessary and attendant evil disposition, dictates the entire action of Iago. He intentionally intensifies the venom of hatred in his heart. Concentration is his only prudence. All the offshoots of his inexhaustible malice, which are gradually drawn out by relentless Circumstance, centre—like the radii of a wheel in the axle, which regulates the movement—in the original malignity of his nature that has selected Othello as its supreme object. He is driven into evil courses by the uncontrollable springs of his own nature. And having commenced a career of iniquity, he expands his energies and develops new crimes under the spur of fear. This is amply attested by his behaviour towards Cassio and Roderigo.

Iago indeed disdains all complex preliminary combinations. His evil genius, unlike every other better form of intellectual power, is most satisfied with the outward expression of its conceptions:—

> "'Tis here, but yet confused:
> Knavery's plain face is never seen *till used*."

He works by wit and not by witchcraft; and "wit depends on dilatory time." He trusts, that is, to time, which, like water falling on a stone, will wear out the noblest and the hardiest nature, and expose the vulnerable part, where evil may at length be cast to blight and mildew. The stray circumstance, the passing incident, the vague suggestion, the trivial and unpremeditated word,—these he can take possession of in furtherance of his primary purpose. His is "a bitter heart that bides its time and bites."[1]

[1] Browning, "Caliban upon Setebos."

Observe, in proof of this, how, already intent upon revenge, he grasps the weapon which the spleen of the defeated, sorrow-stricken father offers him in those rash impulsive words of inconsolable vexation with which he leaves the Council Chamber:—

> "*Brabantio.* Look to her, Moor, if thou hast eyes to see:
> She has deceived her father, and may thee.
> *Othello. My life upon her faith!*"

Fatal words these for Desdemona and her over-confident husband! For they form the nucleus of Iago's impending scheme of hellish circumvention: the slender but strong support on which he instantly fastens his delicate all-enmeshing web:—

> "I have 't. It is engender'd. Hell and night
> Must bring this monstrous birth to the world's light."

And ever after he waits and watches for that propitious Opportunity which, like the sunshine, always draws the serpent from its hole: seizes it, turns it to account. Chance is perfidious. It is therefore Iago's never-failing friend. But still he somehow sees from the beginning the end which all chances and changes help forward. He knows his power, and feels confident that whether circumstances second him or not his evil influence will accomplish itself unto the end. He has secretly sounded all his companions from the lowest note to the top of the compass. And knowing "all qualities, with a learned spirit, of human dealings," his instincts guide him to the frail and feeble parts of men's moral armour; his baits and bribes exactly suit the special idiosyncrasy of those to whom he offers them; and, though never seriously apprehending failure, he has always a suitable alternative ready in case he should fail. He knows perfectly the character and predilections of those with whom he has to deal; and supremely skilled in villainous craft, he so plots and plans as to completely entrap his victims beyond all hope of rescue or escape. His very devilries indeed would seem to repose on a kind of geometry:—

> "If imputation and strong circumstances,
> Which lead directly to the door of truth,
> Will give you satisfaction, you may have 't."

Chance, then, has certainly moulded the details of this vile conspiracy, but it has not implanted the evil conception which it brings to light. That has lain in the secret recesses of his soul, like pistils and stamens in the buds of undeveloped flowers, which only await the genial influence of the sun. The soil of his moral nature is fat, and poisoned with decay; his desires, affections, judgments are all absorbed and plague-smitten by its inbred corruption and carnality, and its gross deep-lurking falsities. No fear, then, but what his deadly nightshade will break into bud and blossom! As he is past all feeling, so he is given up to lasciviousness of thought; because of the hardness of his heart his *understanding* is darkened.

IV. And this darkness is not partial and temporary, but complete and permanent. In the moral, as in the physical world, there are such things as total eclipses. And in the Shakespearian sky we have intimations of such phenomena. The beginnings of all sin, I know, are remote, and the descents gradual. *Nemo repente fuit turpissimus:* men do undoubtedly sink into the depths of vice step by step. But the decisive moment when that extreme turpitude which implies moral permanence takes place, surely comes at last. Sin appears first fitfully, and then predominantly and persistently. One sin follows another as the punishment of its precursor; and judicial blindness, a total perversion of judgment, results from repeated acts of sin. If the path of the just shines more and more unto the perfect day, as men are wont to believe, may not the path of the wicked grow by degrees darker and darker unto total and perpetual night?

Such at least is Shakespeare's deliberate conviction. Julius Muller declares that "such is the constitution of things that unwillingness to goodness may ripen into eternal voluntary opposition to it."[1] And our poet, with a scientific clearness more vivid and incisive still, gives expression to the same momentous truth in the memorable words of Antony to the wily serpent of old Nile:—

> "But when we in our viciousness grow hard—
> O misery on't!—the wise gods seel our eyes;

[1] See his 'Doctrine of Sin,' ii.

> In our own filth drop our clear judgments; make us
> Adore our errors; laugh at's, while we strut
> To our confusion." [1]

There is, then, such a thing as the permanent loss of principle; and a lawless or ill-balanced state of soul that becomes habitual; and a natural law in the spiritual world which declares that sin deliberately persisted in will inevitably produce judicial blindness. Iago impressively illustrates and enforces all these momentous truths.

VII.

In concluding this part of my theme it only remains for me to deal with the questions, Are nature and probability violated in the characterisation? Is such a person as Iago as delineated by the poet, or as interpreted in these pages, incredible? I think not. It is certainly true that the annals of history scarcely furnish a precise parallel for such an inhuman villain. But then Shakespeare paid due heed to the potentialities of spiritual existence. He was alive to the fact that there may be even here a life that is not to be known save by possession. Besides, it is well worthy of remembrance that all ethics is in one sense *a priori*, and is not and cannot be founded on experience.[2]

"No such man as Iago," you say! Why, Iago said that himself! Shakespeare by an ingenious and masterly stroke has anticipated and answered your objection. In accordance with that severity which is part of his method he has even taken that slender hope from you. The vanity of all such merciful beliefs is sternly pressed home upon you. For when Othello's mind is dwelling upon poison, Iago, cold and callous, deaf to pity and blind to beauty as Ulysses in the "Hecuba" when he comes to demand the sacrifice of Polyxena, suggests the slower and more agonising method of destruction: "Strangle her in her bed—even the bed she hath contaminated." (Milton, you remember, in his catalogue of the inmates of hell, has hinted at this dreadful

[1] "Antony and Cleopatra," iii. 13, 111.

[2] See A. J. Balfour, 'A Defence of Philosophic Doubt,' 1879, 338.

affinity between concupiscent thought and malicious action, between the lewd and the murderous passion: Peor and Moloch are placed side by side—"lust hard by hate.") And then, summoned to Desdemona as her "good friend," with the words of doom still warm upon his lips, he emphatically asserts when taxed with searching questions, "There is no such man; *it is impossible.*"

How Iago can be, Shakespeare it is certain does not tell us. Such things will not be dissected, unravelled, or shown. He accepts his existence, however, not as a vague possibility but as a stern and momentous fact. He certainly did not fall a victim to that illusion which in later times, and especially in France, has obstructed psychology, and which attempts to discover in the faculties "the causes which produce the phenomena of the soul."[1] His philosophy deals only with phenomena. His moral system contains at least one ethical proposition of which no proof can be given or required: *evil, inhuman and motiveless, exists.* How it exists does not concern him. The origin of an ultimate and irrevocable ethical belief does not, and cannot, supply either him or us with a reason for believing it.

He does not therefore resort to Lear's methods of moral vivisection in order to see what breeds round Iago's heart, or ascertain what cause in nature has produced this starless night in his ever-darkling soul. We have a sufficiently lucid exposition of the character by soliloquy. But Shakespeare will not consent to offer any apology by analysis. He does not exhaust his brains in searching out such riddles as original sin. Nor does he task his imagination in order to render an account of the cause of everything diseased and abnormal in the world around him. He simply restricts himself to the presentation of an unobstructed view of the actual effects of those august mysteries of the searchless human heart in which he steadfastly, reverently, unquestioningly believes.

Like the Devil himself Iago remains something of an unriddled enigma, as if in fulfilment of his own egoistic vaunt that you could

[1] See Garnier, 'Traité des Facultés de l'Âme, i. 33. Quoted by Taine, iv. 3, 2.

not *know* his heart "if it were in your hand." The true interior biography of the man still seems to exceed the critical powers of our age: no single intellect seems capable of fathoming the deep mysterious law that controls his destiny. Yet any one who brings himself to the serious study of this marvellous character will surely find that Iago answers questions which he has neither skill nor courage to put: that he is no unnatural monster, or chaos of irreconcilable opposites; but in very truth a man, and, in the main, a natural enough man too, quite as intelligible as Byron's Don Juan or Milton's Satan, to both of whom he bears a striking affinity, inasmuch as there is observable in his nature a curious balance of the generic with the individual; a blending of the sensualism of the one with the atheism and realistic freethinking of the other,—a diabolical ideal, in fine, of hard-hearted and heart-hardening intellect that is wholly uncontrolled by conscience and unaffected by the influence of the moral affections, which Shakespeare has set up as a dramatic and ethical study, but still one which Tiberius or Borgia or Caligula has in some sort realised for us as solemn and accomplished fact.[1]

[1] I must here embody in a note a few observations which I omitted to make in a previous section of the text. Bishop Massillon ('Sermons,' ed. 1827, 84), when treating of the betrayal of Jesus by Judas, says in respect of Iscariot that he "had given up his heart to money, before he put a price upon his Master." The same thing may be said of the Ancient. You find him clutching avariciously at Roderigo's purse-strings, before you discover him plucking remorselessly at Othello's heart-strings. In both cases the lust of gain precedes the lust of power. The love of money, or its equivalent, is invariably at the root of all malice and betrayal. Again: I have always thought that the character of the supplanter Iago—its utter want of morality—is well illustrated by his early remark to the gull Roderigo whom he makes his purse;—"I know my *price*." He has no inward worth, and therefore knows that he can neither acquire dignity from, nor lend dignity to, any office which he may hold, or to which he may aspire. But in the realm of ends he knows the merely relative value of the thing desired as an end in itself, and hence he speaks frankly of his *market-price*, true to his ruling characteristic of making everything subservient to his material wants and wishes. Kant, whose ethics are substantially those of our poet, has admirably brought out the distinction between "price" and "dignity" in the second chapter of his 'Metaphysic of Ethics' (Semple's ed., 1869, § 4, p. 46) where he says: "Everything in the realm of ends has either a *price* or a *dignity*. That has a price in the room of which something as an equivalent may be put; but that which is above all price, and admits not substitution by

an equivalent, has a dignity. What is subservient to human wants and wishes has a market-price; and what, when there is no want, serves only to gratify a taste—*i.e.*, a complacency in stimulating the aimless play of fancy—has a fancy-price. But that which constitutes the condition, under which alone anywhat can be an end in itself, has not merely a relative value—*i.e.*, a price,—but has an inward worth—*i.e.*, a dignity. Now morality is the condition under which alone an Intelligent can be figured as an end in himself, since by it alone can he become a legislator in the "*realm of ends.*" Wherefore morality, and humanity in so far as it is susceptible of that morality, is alone that which has the dignity. Diligence, attention, and adroitness have their market-price; wit, gaiety, and good temper have a price of affection; but incorruptible justice, charity, and unbroken faith have an inward worth."

CHAPTER III.

THE MOOR OF VENICE.

I.

LET us now look more closely at the antecedents and environment, at the character and conditions, of Othello. It is necessary, whilst tracing his moral and mental history, to determine who and what he was in the life of Venice. Before we can grasp him as a great dramatic personality or psychological whole of the poet's own creation, an attempt must be made to gather up the scanty memorials of that adventurous career which, prior to the opening of the story, he had passed in "antres vast and deserts idle," the leading incidents whereof,—the disastrous chances, the "moving accidents by flood and field," the "hair-breadth scapes i' the imminent deadly breach," with his enslavement to, and redemption from, the insolent foe, and his travels amongst the Cannibals and the Anthropophagi,—he recounts with all a poet's passion to the gentle wondering Desdemona, who loves him for those dangers he has passed, and with sighs and tears and downright violence yields up her soul and fortunes to his "honours and his valiant parts." For it will presently appear that the Moor is not only a subject fit to be studied by the dramatic critic, but also in equal measure and with almost equal advantage by the ethnographer, the moralist, and the physiologist.

First, then, it has been conjectured by students of Venetian history that by the appellation *Othello the Moor* we are to under-

stand *Otello Moro*, the head and representative of the Othelli del Moro, an ancient family of Greek extraction which, coming originally from the Morea or land of the mulberry, had settled in Venice some time prior to the fifteenth century, and shortly afterwards attained to ducal rank. In 1462 we certainly find that one Cristoforo Moro, who, like Othello, had served with distinction in the wars of his country, and with whom Mr Rawdon Brown and Professor Ruskin have identified the Moor of Shakespeare, is mentioned as occupying the high position of Doge or Chief Magistrate in the Senate of Venice. And the armorial bearings of the house of Moro—three mulberries surmounted by the unjewelled ducal bonnet made of simple gold brocade to cover the under-cap of snow-white linen — not only point to the Morean ancestry of this noble Venetian family, but would seem at first sight to give colour to the surmise of the above-mentioned writers, who identify the "Il Moro" of Cinthio's novel, from which our poet derived his hero, with Cristoforo, the fifteenth-century magnifico of the queenly city of the Adriatic.

The evidence, however, upon which this identification is based is, I think, of the slenderest and shallowest kind. If Shakespeare possessed any knowledge at all of this ancient family, it is scarcely to be supposed that, whilst following, with so few deviations from its general outline and incidents, the story of 'Il Moro di Venezia'—one of the hundred novels printed by Leonardo Torrentino in the year 1561—he would have transmuted without apparent reason the family name into an individual one. And if the tradition of Morean ancestry had any weight with him, it can hardly be conceived that the poet would have made his hero at the same time a Moorish military adventurer in the service of the great Italian Republic, a *condottiere*, not of Spanish, but of African lineage.

Whence he derived the appellative is a question as much shrouded in mystery as the source from whence he obtained the title of Othello's Grecian-named Italian wife (*δυσδαιμονία*) who figures here as the daughter of the Venetian Senator Brabantio, of whom, it is well to remember, there is no mention made at

all in the original story, which was translated into French in 1584, but not "done into" English until 1795, when Wolstenholme Parr published the translation which is now in use. Everything, indeed, points to the conclusion that Shakespeare was entirely ignorant of the existence of this patrician family of the Othelli and the significant blazon on their heraldic shield, which, by the way, he has changed from mulberries into strawberries, just as he has converted the symbol of patrimonial possessions or family dignities into a fancy embroidery on a handkerchief delicately worked in the Moorish taste, or, as we would now express it, in the thinly traced arabesque pattern. From whatever source he obtained the names of his *personæ*, there is nothing to show that he followed any authentic historical record at all, or availed himself of any other material for the basis of his play than was to be found ready at hand in the 'Hecatommithi' of Giraldo Cinthio of Ferrara, from which, as I have said, he has in several places deviated, only however to heighten the tragic effects of the story, and demonstrate the inexhaustible fertility of his own resources and the marvellous judgment of his own mind.

But it is not necessary that I should here identify the Othello of our poet with any distinct historical personage. One is satisfied to accept him as an imaginary or ideal creation like Mr Browning's loyal Moorish commander Luria; a character designed to typify with tragic realism the weaknesses, foibles, virtues, passions, and sufferings of human life in visible and agonised conflict with the mysterious powers of darkness, ignorance, and sin. Shakespeare plainly intended him to stand as the representation of an ideal type of Humanity. Yet for this very reason he was extremely careful to denote his race and origin, his epoch and surroundings, and to indicate the physiological conditions which together with his early training moulded those habits of life and that unbridled lawlessness of will through which alone the tragic catastrophe could have been readily and effectively accomplished. And thus he appears as at once the most terrible and magnificent monument of ideal art, and a living, warm-breathing reality as intensely genuine, authentic, and unideal as was ever

the Venetian Doge of whom Ruskin speaks as the celebrated restorer of the palace of Ziani.[1]

II.

And in consequence of the realistic verisimilitude of the characterisation, considerable controversy has naturally arisen as to what race our poet really intended we should suppose Othello to belong. He is represented in the play as "black" and "thick-lipped." And from these characteristic features in the physiognomy of the various peoples constituting the type of the Black Race, it has been inferred that he must necessarily have sprung from one of the negro tribes. Coleridge, however, has admirably stated two important objections to this view. In the first place, he argues in effect that a barbarous or semi-civilised negro could not consistently claim royal birth; and in the second place, he maintains that it would be altogether monstrous to suppose that a beautiful Venetian girl, gently nurtured like Desdemona—

> "A maiden never bold;
> Of spirit so still and quiet, that her motion
> Blush'd at herself"—

as we read in the very first Act,—would suddenly fall in love with a veritable negro. Besides this, it is evident, from a passage in Act iv. scene 2, that Shakespeare intended that we should regard him as a native of Mauritania, one of the Barbary States; so that he is, in the proper acceptation of the term, a Moor, or, as Hunter defines it, "a native of the northern coast of Africa towards the west;" the expression "black" simply signifying therefore *very dark*—or perhaps as we would now say *tawny*—in contradistinction to the almost unexceptional *fairness* of the normal European.[2]

[1] See on the points here noticed an article by Fanny Kemble on "Salvini's Othello" in 'Temple Bar' for July 1884, 368; also Ruskin's 'Stones of Venice,' i. 215 and note; and Hazlitt's 'Shakespeare's Library,' Part i., vol. ii. 282-284.

[2] *Moor* it may be observed was used by English writers very extensively, and all the dark races seem by some writers to be regarded as comprehended under

This interpretation is further supported by Philo's allusion to the "tawny front," or dark complexion of the Egyptian enchantress as compared with that of the Roman ladies, in "Antony and Cleopatra," Act i. scene 1, l. 6.

Though by race, complexion, disposition, and habits a stranger in the republic which he serves, Othello, once a Mohammedan by reason of his Moorish origin, has become a Christian and a Venetian. It is as a sort of Paladin of the Venetian host, a Moorish Bayard *sans peur et sans reproche*, with all the passion of a poet and a hero intermingled, that we first become acquainted with him. He is the impersonation of knitted strength: a man whose vigour remains unimpaired though he has far declined into the vale of years, for, from what he twice says of himself, it may be inferred that he is close upon fifty-five or even sixty years of age. What first strikes one is his regal strength and exotic grandeur, his simple heroic action, his openness and candour of mind, his chivalrous romantic love, and his invincible loyalty to the city of his adoption. Nothing could surpass the tender protectiveness of his demeanour towards his young Italian wife; his firmness and calmness, his severity of discipline and strength of will, his self-restraint and courtliness of behaviour. Indeed one might safely quote Othello in almost every situation in life as the very model of good-breeding and quiet unaffected refinement, just as the more civilised Greeks were wont to do in respect of Homer. He is the paragon of gentlemen; a being with something more than the Oriental, the Grecian, or the Gallic tact and grace.

But allied to these attractive qualities there are other traits still more deserving of attention. Closed in, as it were, and shut up behind this calm yet essentially barbaric simplicity of soul and natural sweetness of disposition, there are other habits that have but partially yielded to the discipline and restraint of Venetian society with all its exquisite refinements and exclusive ceremonies; and other powers and passions that, generated and developed by the very air which he had breathed in Barbary, are still secretly

it. Sir Thomas Elyot calls the Ethiopians Moors. A distinction, however, was sometimes made between black Moors and white Moors.—Hunter, 'New Illustrations of Shakespeare,' ii. 281.

striving and struggling for supremacy—ready at some strong prompting from without to leap into fatal prominence, and disturb or destroy the equilibrium of his pliable, credulous, self-reliant nature. The even balance of his conduct and that measure of self-possession and power over his passions which he has gradually attained through patient and persistent practice of, or studious conformity to, the arts of civilised life, and his enforced intercourse with the courtiers and magnificoes of Venice, is daily in danger of being broken down and overthrown. The inward repose and self-command into which both on principle and by necessity he has tutored himself knows nor dreads at present any outward shock.

But to understand the story aright, and to prepare ourselves properly for the culminant catastrophe, we must here take into consideration the existence of those cryptic and hereditary forces which meanwhile lie latent in the depths of this gracious manhood. Etna crowned with sunlit breadths of snow, its fires sunk, and its dark storm-cloud of smoke no longer fouling with ominous blackness the liquid azure of Sicilian skies, is not a whit more deceptive than this dusky stranger who, reclaimed from the wilds and the natural rudeness of his manners, appears wreathed in smiles of placid satisfaction during that short-lived triumph of his joy which comes to him, through Desdemona's love and beauty, as the happiest accident of his life, and which, as the Venetian Duke opines, has made him for the moment "far more fair than black."

As one, tricked by imagination, may fancy—as I have often done when gazing at its pallid crest from the slopes of Syracuse or the streets of Catania, overpowered by a sense of the all-prevailing mystery and magnificence of the scene—that Typhôn still groans at the roots of the mountain, and Hêphaistos plies his heavy hammer on its scarred and wrinkled peaks, over which in periodic fits of passion the blazing and boiling lava-rivers will burst spontaneously to devour with black and cruel jaws the smooth and smiling fields of fruitful Sicily,—so at first sight of the calm self-centred Othello, who appears before us through a luminous mist or atmosphere of romance, great as that which invests the burning mountain, which is still the perennial nurse of snow, in the old Pindaric ode that has given it poetic immor-

tality, one can well imagine the ceaseless action of hostile and eruptive forces in his warlike soul, and inextinguishable fires of passion that at some emotional crisis in his career will suddenly leap forth from thence with all the savagery of a nature which all the arts of civilisation will prove powerless to fetter or subdue, to overwhelm with the blackness of desolation the happy home where love and beauty reign; to wreck for ever the peace of the Christian marriage-bed; and destroy with the burning lava of their scorn and the bitter ashes of their deadly hate that smiling, doting, unsuspecting child of nature over whom he now towers in regal strength, yet with a tenderness and protective devotion that are wellnigh immeasurable.

There was a time when Etna was *not* a burning mountain. There is also a period when the devouring fires lie masked in the wild volcanic nature of the Moor. But his presence and antecedents alike forewarn us of that dreadful conjuration which voices the horror of the third Act, and shows how thoroughly his blood has been fired by the piercing suns and impoisoned atmosphere of Africa; how thoroughly the lawless instincts of the desert-life have survived to dominate and sway the blind motions of his unconquered and indomitable spirit.

"Look here, Iago;
All my fond love thus do I blow to heaven.
'Tis gone.
Arise, black vengeance, from thy hollow cell!
Yield up, O love, thy crown and hearted throne
To tyrannous hate! Swell, bosom, with thy fraught,
For 'tis of aspics' tongues! . . . . . .
O blood, blood, blood! . . . . . .
. . . . . Like to the Pontic sea,
Whose icy current and compulsive course
Ne'er feels retiring ebb, but keeps due on
To the Propontic and the Hellespont,
Even so my bloody thoughts, with violent pace,
Shall ne'er look back, ne'er ebb to humble love,
Till that a capable and wide revenge
Swallow them up. Now, by yond marble heaven,
In the due reverence of a sacred vow
I here engage my words."

Here, to anticipate a little, he abjures in the fury of his "waked wrath" the gentler passion that so recently had found a lodgment in his heart; allows the "dram of base" to overflow his perfect soul; and permits the powers of evil to overmaster all his heroic tenderness, his loftiness of spirit, his generous magnanimity and confident candour of mind;—in a word, he destroys the absolute and simple naturalness of his whole being. This is the inevitable end of such a soul. All real power is forfeited, all good is blasted, and all loyalty forsworn. *Fronti nulla fides*, therefore: there is no trusting the features; no certainty in judgments based on outward seeming. The Etnas and Cotopaxis of nature are after all less cruel and hurtful than the Macbeths and Othellos, or the Cæsars and Napoleons of mankind!

You see, then, that we have first to take into account the unplumbed depths that lie beneath this sunny and unruffled surface. We have to keep in remembrance the fact that this tawny Mauritanian prince, emancipated by the chances and changes of war from the almost pariah-state in which he once was, has not quite overcome his primitive disposition; that his complexion, which, as Roderigo says, is like "the shadowed livery of the burnished sun," demonstrates the ineffaceable stain of his birth; and that the principles and passions of his hot Moorish nature have not in reality succumbed to the influence of foreign laws and milder manners, but, on the contrary, are daily threatening to blossom into blood-red sin or fling their fiery ruin on everything around.

To put the matter in plainer form, we are called upon at the outset to give due heed to the fact of his half-barbaric origin, and to pay attention to those distinctive traits and tendencies of his race, those germs of ancestral follies and weaknesses which are coursing in his veins, and which form the potential or ready-made materials for a catastrophe such as that which eventually overtakes him. He has not sufficient moral stamina to repel all the attacks which can be brought by Apollyon Circumstance against his soul. We must not overlook his mental deficiencies or his ignorance of the arts and conventions of civilised life, which refuse to be grafted on so wild a stem. Nor must we forget those

elements which not only afterwards give fatality to his character but from the first invest it with a regal splendour and romantic charm—the superstitious and tropical fancy; the violent and torrid temperament: the oriental rapture and poetic power of passion: the irresistible impulse to violence and revenge, and the crude notions of justice, morality, and religion, which, so to speak, have sprung from the soil of Africa and been lashed into frenzy by the poisonous simoom that sweeps with its flame-breath across the desert-wilds amidst which his early life was spent. So that, as it seems to me, the key to the interpretation of Othello's character really lies in the fact that although educational influences, or civilised arts, or social discipline, or legal checks may temporarily restrain from active exercise the instincts, faculties, and powers of Nature, she will inevitably resume her sway and reassert her absolute dominion. Which, in effect, is but a new rendering of the ancient axiom of Horace: *Naturam expellas furcâ, tamen usque recurret.*

III.

Shakespeare has treated the incidents of Othello's life as mere materials without historic scruple. The real problem which he had to solve when he took up the Italian story was not what Othello was, but what could be made of him. He well knew that historic truth is no canon of æsthetic truth; and that a successful artistic representation, even whilst running counter to our ascertained knowledge of antecedent or contemporary history, will usually illustrate and maintain the principles of scientific truth. His artistic virtue, indeed, is the direct issue and outcome of his deep and accurate spiritual insight. And it is this latter faculty which gives to his portraiture of the Moor a realistic verisimilitude which at once satisfies our reason and æsthetic sense and prevents us from ever questioning the historical probability of the events described.

We do not care to know whether Othello or Iago actually existed. We are more anxious to ascertain whether or not

the poet's delineations are true to nature; whether they are truly interpretative of the larger history of spiritual life. Of the real originals of Achilles, of Arthur, of Faust, or Don Juan we know nothing or next to nothing. Indeed for the purposes of imagination or morality we desire to know nothing. It suffices us to know that the facts asserted in the legends and myths which they severally embody have an infinite personal value for us; that they enforce with real eloquence a profound moral or religious meaning; and reflect for the benefit and instruction of all future ages the living spirit or universal soul which in our deeper moral experiences finds in some sense a natural medium of utterance through us.

This in short constitutes the chief attraction and power of such productions as Shakespeare's "Hamlet" or Goethe's "Faust." They cease to be special forms remote and external, to be interpreted by an allegorical treatment. As products of the loftiest imagination they are rather potent instruments in the extension of experience; æsthetic auxiliaries of revealed Religion in the holy work of stimulating and strengthening the individual conscience or moral sense. Our own experience or positive knowledge indeed falls in certain moods into those distinctive shapes which other times and persons have by anticipation given it. And thus those imaginary stories of ideal life which have emanated from the prolific genius of Shakespeare and Marlowe, of Goethe and Scott, have directly tended to exercise a sanative virtue in society, to build up the moral life of their posterity, and enrich the soul of the whole world.

Our great poets have but given shape to a vital body of spiritual experience which may be afterwards verified by our own inner consciousness, and imaginatively expressed as a theory or doctrine of almost universal application. One certainly does not choose to gather the facts of civil history from the historical plays and the historical romances of Shakespeare and Scott. But who can deny that the dramatist and the novelist have in almost equal measure accomplished a great achievement towards the *interpreting* of history? Somehow no critic dares to reverse their sentence. For they have both grasped in thought the national

life of England and Scotland during many memorable centuries; and if they have not painted men with the minuteness of the pre-Raphaelite artist, or events with the stern accuracy of the professed historian, they have at least faithfully revealed the universal passions, powers, and purposes of our fallen nature. Nay, more, the individualising power which drew King John and Richard III., or Jonathan Oldbuck and Caleb Balderstone, has also projected itself into our own age, and given a terrible or brilliant painting of our own inner life.

And so "Hamlet," "King Lear," and "Macbeth," which have spiritualised the central ideas of humanity, are in a certain sense a kind of conquest over time. They are poems of concentrated energy having natural foundations; world-wide in their significance, and imperishable in their human interest. And in respect of "Othello" the same remark of course applies. Here also we have a drama which is a sincere and solid expression of human thought and human feeling: a drama, moreover, which naturally provokes at every step we take the discussion of the profoundest problems in Ethics and Religion. It stands us much in hand to know and to feel this. For, imbued with such an idea, and influenced by such a belief, one may safely accept our poet as an historian—one having due regard to race, epoch, and surroundings, and the events which give force and character to these—without troubling one's self as to the validity of Mr Ruskin's theory of identification as regards the Moor, to which I have already incidentally adverted.

And this opinion I would seek to strengthen and confirm by giving prominence in this place to some admirable remarks of Heinrich Heine, which, apart from their immediate appositeness, help, I think, to prepare the way for what falls to be said in the succeeding sections of this study. "The scene," says the great German critic, "of the action of Shakespeare's plays is the globe itself—this is his unity of place; eternity is the period of the action of his pieces—this is his unity of time; and in conformity with these two unities is the hero of his drama, who represents the central point—the unity of interest. Humanity is his hero, a hero continually dying and continually being born, continually

loving, continually hating, yet loving more than hating; to-day crawling like a worm, to-morrow soaring like an eagle towards the sun; to-day meriting a fool's cap, to-morrow a laurel wreath, oftener deserving both at once—the big dwarf, the pigmy giant, the god prepared on homœopathic principles, in whom the divinity, though much diluted, still exists. Ah! let modesty and shame preserve us from too much talking of the heroism of such a hero!"

IV.

We find, then, in Othello the man a profound subject for psychological study. By nature, as we first behold him, he is the antagonist of that principle which Iago throughout represents; yet he also is destined to be its victim eventually. He reflects the highest and worthiest gifts, powers, and sentiments of humanity. His desires are towards the high and true. But, as I have already indicated, there is a certain side of his nature—from which indeed the very strength and pertinacity of his affections spring—that conceals a dormant yet superabundant energy or procreant force that in defiance of all restraints is secretly gathering day by day a destructive strength, and which is destined, as by a congenital necessity of his being, to leap forth when the currents of his blood have been corrupted and inflamed by the cruel suspicions which the reptile trickster Iago has created in his credulous mind.

The mental deficiencies of his nature have been secretly perpetuated. The bad racial traits, though long concealed, have not been obliterated. Iago's dangerous conceits, that are confessedly poisons, when once allowed to "act upon the blood, burn like the mines of sulphur." In the midst of civilisation, and in defiance of all acquired or habitual virtues, he can still degenerate by a slow and gradual process of declension into the primal savage state. A few words will help to make this plainer.

To an almost pathetic simple-mindedness there is added a soldier-like bluntness of speech, and a taste that is essentially barbaresque. To a sort of devout temerity there is added a blustering honesty, which betrays that excess of self-confidence

which finds expression in his own declaration, "My parts, my title, and my perfect soul shall manifest me rightly." To this pride of noble descent and the glory of an ancient and renowned race, there is added the spirit of revenge, which is also indigenous to the Moorish character. The bland modesty which at first we so much admire gives place at length to violent self-assertion; and the gentle simplicity of discourse which so commands our respect in the early scenes gives way at last to a virulent eloquence.

Usually Othello is in a state of elevated emotion, which agrees well with the reputed freedom and openness of his nature. And in his calmer moments these characteristics manifest themselves in an evenness of conduct and a confident candour and a credulity that is born of Christian charity; things which constitute the essential elements in that liberal and tenderly indulgent good-breeding which never can be manufactured by the inexorable restraints and the arbitrary usages of society, but which alone springs direct with unobtrusive majesty from the great, wide, loving heart of Nature herself. This indeed is so true of the general demeanour of the Moor that, notwithstanding he is confessedly rude in speech, and "little blessed with the soft phrase of peace,"—by which observe is meant, as he afterwards explains in the third Act, that he has "not those soft parts of conversation that chamberers have,"—he may safely be accepted, I think, as Shakespeare's most perfect gentleman.

But still all his feelings are veined and coloured with the superstitious and the marvellous. And when once his suspicions are thoroughly aroused, the "vicious mole of nature" that has long remained concealed manifests itself in petty acts of cunning, or in paltry exposition of those traditional fooleries which have been consecrated by the ancient usage and belief of his race. Now you see him playing the spy and eavesdropper in respect of the actions and words of Michael Cassio—an act that should have been repugnant to a character professedly so open and direct as his; and again you find him attaching vital importance to the purloined handkerchief, his first gift to Desdemona, which he declares is a "*charmed* napkin" wrought by a sibyl, with which its possessor could "entirely subdue the affections of her

husband," notwithstanding the eloquent denial which he made before the Venetian Senate to the charge preferred against him that he had employed the "arts inhibited" of sorcery and witchcraft in order to win the holy heart of old Brabantio's daughter.

Again: In Othello the sense of personal worth is nobly embodied in efficient action. But he obviously lacks the reasonableness that is necessary to forceful life. Social discipline has so far modified the character of the man. But he cannot emancipate himself from the beliefs and traditions, still less from the influence of those unreasoning impulses that are peculiar to his race, so as to see things around him in their real relations. He is subject to the bias of race. His opinions are warped, and his judgment is distorted by inherited emotions. And his virtues, incapable of extricating themselves from ancient abuses and excesses, are gradually transformed by credulity, superstition, and fanaticism into fatal infatuations. His firmness degenerates into obstinacy; his pride into impious and despotic arrogance; his love into blind aggressive selfishness; his courage into contempt of death; and his nobility and gentleness into puerile meannesses and a coarseness of speech that elicits even from the flippant, coarse-minded Emilia herself the remark that "a beggar in his drink could not have laid such terms upon his callat."[1] Rashness destroys all prudence and circumspection. And his love, deep and strong as it is, is for the moment overmatched by the terrible ferocity of a new-born hate. Here, surely, if anywhere, we have a Shakespearian hero after Heine's heart: a big dwarf, or a pigmy giant, with the cruel passion of a Borgia and the melting pathos of a Brutus intermingled; to-day a crawling worm of the dust, and to-morrow a giant spirit of the wilderness soaring sunward with eagle flight, "leaving no track behind"!

It has been said that "Civilisation is a reagent, and eats away the old traits." But this, like most aphoristic sayings that have acquired popularity, contains only a half-truth. It might almost be treated indeed as a facetious observation without in the least prejudicing what of truth it contains. For it cannot be forgotten that gastronomy is unquestionably the daughter of Civilisation.

[1] See Act iv. sc. 2, l. 34 *et seq.*; also sc. 1, l. 250; and Act v. sc. 2, l. 132.

To speak seriously, however, the progress of civilisation is certainly attended with a proportionate improvement in the organisation of man, and particularly in the sphere of the nervous tissues, the cerebral functions gaining increased power and activity as the moral nature gains ascendancy over the animal. But just as inoculation, whilst acting as an important preventive of smallpox, or at the very least as a powerful agent against its virulence, does not change the blood, and is not therefore an infallible security against the disease: so Civilisation, whilst producing a material improvement in the organisation of man, does not change the blood or eradicate the inherited evil tendencies of his nature. It stimulates the habit of self-control, and procures the partial subjection of the impulses and instincts of the animal nature to the dictates of the intellectual being—to that embodied law and power, in a word, which is rooted in the moral order of things. But still man may never thoroughly master or possess his nature. Some interrupting and importunate passion, brought into action by that relentless enemy Circumstance, which so often succeeds in "breaking down the pales and forts of reason," may cause him to relapse into the savage state from which he has gradually been withdrawn, to yield to unreasoning impulses, and—especially when he is of oriental blood—to break out into violence and immediate murder. And this is precisely the case with Othello, who, although undeniably embodying "the ennobled characteristics of the coloured division of the human family," is still incapable, when frowned on by Circumstance, of holding in restraint the fiery, irritable, revengeful impulses which belong to it, or, in Hamlet's phrase, of obliterating "the stamp of one defect" from which he takes corruption.

V.

As from his origin, then, Othello is a being essentially free, so in consequence of his freedom he is capable of change. Even his organic powers are all the more flexible on that account. And this fact, as we might well expect, does not escape the all-observant Ancient. "The Moor already changes with my poison," he says.

And no sooner has he succeeded in infusing the gall and wormwood of his malice into Othello's sensitive soul than he professes to feel some delicate compunction for the suffering he has deliberately caused. When the very monsoon of raving misery is sweeping over his victim's mind, and the words of vengeance 'Blood, blood, blood!" are passing from his lips, he makes a mock display of repressive toleration and humane forbearance. "Patience, I say; *your mind perhaps may change.*" What a master-stroke! He envenoms his hate by concentrating it. He well knows that at such a crisis any indication of a merciful and relenting spirit, if sincerely believed in, will only have the effect of strengthening the murderous resolve in the heart of him to whom the remark is addressed; that any obstacle presented at such a moment to a nature so highly organised and vascular, and one therefore so extremely sensitive to pain, will only tend to deepen the injury he has already inflicted and accelerate the terrible catastrophe for which he has plotted and planned.

Under the mask of friendship Iago deliberately cherishes the evil passions of the Moor. By a simulated clemency he inflames those wicked wishes which are driving their unconscious slave into irretrievable ruin. He does not wish Othello to alter his course; nor does he even wish him to palter with his purpose once it is avowed. Yet with diabolical subtlety he suggests the maddening thought that after all his mind *may* change. Iago's remark, offered ostensibly as a serious check to the wildness of the General's passion, is to my thinking the most terrible example of that wanton and malignant irony by which a man secretly attempts to humour the folly or the criminality of another with the view only of rendering it more extravagant and incorrigible; if I except perhaps the earlier speech which he addresses to Othello after he has effectually set him on the rack, beginning with these words—

> "My lord, I would I might entreat your honour
> To scan this thing no further; *leave it to time.*"[1]

Having fixed the Moor in the death-grip of his hellish hate, Iago

[1] Read with this Iago's more candid deliverance wherein he affirms that he "works by wit, and not by witchcraft, and *wit depends on dilatory time.*"

thus amuses himself by affirming and disclaiming in turns. And either way he leaves the fatal imprint of his impoisoned fang on the quivering, bleeding, sinking heart of his credulous and unsuspecting victim, who probably furnishes the most striking illustration of the truth and force of the Ancient's own description of the jealous man as one "who dotes, yet doubts, suspects, yet strongly loves." When I last saw (7th April 1884) Salvini supported by Udina in this scene of helpless and unbeauteous agony I could not but recall to my remembrance that famous but almost unbearable piece of sculpture which represents Milo caught and held mockingly fast in the cleft tree which he undertook to rive, with the ravening wolf tearing remorselessly at him.

But this incident has yet another aspect. Underlying the forecited remark there is something more than fiendish irony. In an early conversation with Roderigo (Act i. sc. 3) Iago had made emphatic allusion to the changeableness of the Moorish nature. Then the assertion was made with the view of strengthening the ignoble hopes of his dupe. Now it presents itself to his own ever-analysing mind *in the shape of a fear*. His serpentine manœuvres have succeeded almost beyond all expectation in arousing the terrible wrath of Othello. And with that so far he is satisfied. Yet he fears that the vengeful passion will be but short-lived: that his purposes will be defeated by the revival of the old love and the wonted gentleness. He knows that Desdemona's love can both *make and unmake*—and perhaps make again! Is she not "our great captain's captain" who can do what she lists "even as her appetite shall play the god with his weak function"?

And so he punctures and cauterises the gaping wound that he has made.[1] He strikes afresh at the hero's most vulnerable parts. He virtually impeaches his independence, impugns the honour of his word, and attributes to the mere violence of a passing and uncertain emotion what he desires to make the permanent active

[1] Of the same nature is Iago's remark in the same scene—

> "My friend is dead; 'tis done at your request;
> *But let her live.*"

And the effect is the same. Such intercession is maddening.

resolution of his will: "Patience, I say; your mind *perhaps* may change."

And the result of this hollow profession of clemency "o'er-flourished by the devil," as we read in "Twelfth Night," is just as he anticipated and intended. Othello, who at first could say,

> "I swear 'tis better to be much abused
> Than but to know't a little,"

and then demand confirmatory proofs of Desdemona's infidelity, bursts out at length into a vehement denial which carries conviction with it. He will neither suffer delay nor practise mercy. He kneels and makes his vow to Heaven. Iago follows suit, and binds himself by oath, like a Mohawk, to do mischief. And so the die is cast! Othello quits our sight in order to find out "some swift means of death for the fair devil."

Now in Act iv. scene 1, we discover more clearly the full effect of Iago's device. After Othello's recovery from the epileptic fit, hereafter to be noticed, he further indulges in sententious bursts of plausible hypocrisy. The reader will remember the passage concluding with these words:—

> "Marry, patience;
> Or I shall say, *You are all in all in spleen,*
> *And nothing of a man.*"

To which the Moor, more visibly led by the nose than ever, replies:—

> "Dost thou hear, Iago?
> I will be found *most cunning in my patience;*
> But (dost thou hear?) *most bloody.*"

Thus, for Iago, who watches his prey with sly and sleepless vigilance, making assurance doubly sure; and, for himself, riveting the galling fetters that are destined to eat into his very soul. For with the calmness of despair and with an agonised sense of justice that might prompt a religious sacrifice, he in this way resolves, like the African with his fetich, to destroy with his own hand the cherished idol of his heart rather than submit meekly to the premeditated outrage which he *imagines* is offered to his love and honour.

Though usually docile in character therefore, and uniformly pure and upright in conduct, the total independence natural to him tends to produce a strong self-consciousness. This is apparent from the following speech, in which he betrays a sort of complacent confidence in his own fate-fencedness, and almost chuckles, in fact, over his too apparent bad luck :—

> "'*Tis the plague of great ones;*
> Prerogatived are they less than the base ;
> Tis destiny unshunnable, like death :
> Even then *this forked plague is fated to us*
> When *we* do quicken."

Although he gives striking examples of the most heroic virtue and generous devotion, his very position has of itself fostered pride and wilfulness. In Iago's phrase he uses a "bombast circumstance." And the proneness to cruelty inherent in his nature, the tyranny of the blood and the arbitrariness of the will, are always ready to manifest themselves with disastrous effects whenever an opportunity occurs. We see this in Act ii. scene 3, during the foul rout of Cassio's drunkenness :—

> " My *blood* begins my safer guides to rule,
> And *passion*, having my best judgment *collied*,
> *Assays to lead the way.*"

What is here spoken of as a dreaded thing—as an incipient lawlessness of feeling to be strenuously guarded against—ultimately takes shape in overt action from which there is for ever no possibility of withdrawal. Circumstance asserts itself with a force which he cannot resist. It eventually mars everything, and allows "the dram of base" to leak out and run "to his own scandal." It frowns on Desdemona ; but its real shadow is cast upon himself. It darkens and puddles his *own* clear spirit. Henceforth he distrusts his own original perceptions, strenuously resists his nobler impulses, abjures the faith on which his life depends, and unreservedly submits his will to the control of his betrayer. The savage impulse—all the stronger and sterner perhaps from its long repression—leaps into fatal prominence. The noble nature which it clouds and scorches cracks open by

central convulsions like so much baked volcanic clay. He blindly rushes on ruin and death in order to vindicate his marital honour, which he values better than life. And one moment knells the woe of years!

VI.

But here I am reminded of a deeply significant point which ought not to be left unmarked. Othello, as truly as Iago, yields to the hostile principle and so falls. But—to use a paradoxical expression which perhaps may be allowed here for purposes of illustration, although I am well aware that as strictly and originally applied to a great problem of ethics it contains a most pernicious untruth—his fall may be said to be a "fall upward." By which I mean that like Orestes of old Othello is struck at through his virtue. Aiming at purity, justice, and truth, he sins ignorantly, if foully. And although we condemn the sin we cannot therefore deny our sympathy to the sinner. Nay, more, his human weakness not only evokes our pity and compassion; but, speaking in an artistic sense, it alone renders the character possible, and forms therefore the natural and essential *fundus* of the tragedy itself. But for the dulness, credulity, violence of temperament, and natural susceptibility to change which combine to produce that fatal infirmity of character which one can readily comprehend, those palpably abrupt transitions from good to bad, from virtue to vice, and from love to hate which mark the sudden spiritual transformation of the General's nature, would appeal in vain both to our experience and artistic sense as being in the nature of things impossible.

Anxious to illustrate the curve in the moral law, Shakespeare has in these two representative types of evil, Othello and Iago, expressly differentiated between depravity and corruption. And we also must carefully distinguish human infirmity from human iniquity. Iago has neither eye nor heart for purity, beauty, love, or truth; whereas Othello even at the moment of his greatest wrong-doing demonstrates both by word and deed that with the

exclusion from his world of these ennobling graces his true life must end.

So that whilst by the law of direct heredity, or through the weakness of national character, the moral sense of the Moor is ultimately subordinated to, or blinded by the savage impulse that stirs his hot Mauritanian blood into the wildest ferment when once his pride and honour are affected, there is discoverable no wilful perversion of nature, no conscious or voluntary solicitation of evil such as distinguishes Richard III., or Iago, or even Iachimo in "Cymbeline," who is simply a weak reproduction of his Moorship's Ancient with all the "intellectual hell-starch" washed out of him.

These are loveless beings who cannot be penetrated by moral beauty. Their eyes are always full of desperation and stony depravity. With them life has no human and ethical root. Beauty has no inward meaning or intrinsic worth; and instead of it acting therefore as a step by which the soul mounts upward, it becomes to them only a fatally alluring snare to drag it still farther downward. Self-interest is substituted for friendship, and self-love for affection. Personal gain is put in the place of honesty; and the moral, in a word, is rigorously subordinated to the intellectual nature, from which all great *human* qualities are rudely divorced. But, as I have just indicated, it is far otherwise with Othello. And this you discover in the whole course of his affecting relations with Desdemona, of whom it is now necessary to speak more directly.

CHAPTER IV.

DESDEMONA AND OTHELLO.

I.

BUT how shall I describe the pure and simple-hearted Desdemona, —she whose injured and defenceless innocence has so wrung our souls "that all for pity we could die,"[1]—as I seem to see her gowned in virginal white listening to the pitiful tale of the noble Moor, like one held suspended in a dream;—a creature shining like the morning star new risen on the brow of Night? The book of poetry or of travel has slipped from the shapely hand that clasps her aged father's wrist. The chaplet of flowers she has so recently been weaving (doubtless for some holy rite) has also fallen by her side; and a few stray rose-pink petals break the whiteness of the damasked dress that clings in sinuous folds to her sloping shoulders, and falls in broad amplitude behind her lower limbs. Her whole attention is concentrated on the swarthy stranger. With intense and wistful gaze she watches his every movement. With throbbing heart and greedy ears she catches up and devours every soft or thrilling inflection of his clear and mellow voice as he tells with manly modesty his wondrous tale. And, the story being done, she gives him for his pains "a world of sighs." The forces of her ardent soul are strained to the very uttermost, and her over-excited sensibility betrays itself with all the simple passion of untrammelled youth in those inaudible

[1] See Mrs Jameson, 'Characteristics of Women,' 224.

double-sighs and stifled sobs and tears which do not fall. Those "tears of perfect moan" are ominous of sorrow and of evil; this agitated passionateness of heart foretells the coming tragedy.

But let us look at her more closely as she thus sits in an attitude of tearful and enamoured dumbness. The beauty of her outward form has in it purity: somewhat of that higher beauty, too, which, like truth, *commands* men's homage. Delicacy and fragility, the great essentials of all true beauty, are also present. These are the qualities, then, which one's eye first singles out and rests on longest. But they are qualities that are immeasurably enhanced by the timidity, softness, and smoothness of her whole manner and demeanour, which eloquently express the inexhaustible gentleness and benevolence of her soul. Yet with all her timidity there is visible nothing akin to fear, which, from its inevitable alliance with ferocity, would necessarily be destructive of the perfect ideality of the character. This happily exhibits Shakespeare's pre-eminent delicacy of touch in female portraiture. For it is misfortune, bravely faced and patiently endured, that brings out the moral bloom and beauty of this soul, and exquisitely perfects it. You will find that when she is brought into the deadly trial of her goodness she will exhibit in vivid light a vital courage. Even at this stage we can discover in her gleams of an imaginative and sensitive, yet deeply resolute, nature, secretly yearning for something higher and nobler than the life around her. In all that she does she is terribly in earnest; and we feel as we watch her that a strong passion once awakened in such a breast means, even when mistaken or betrayed, *love for evermore*. It is no sickly and sentimental passion that will spring up suddenly in such a soul. She cannot love by halves. She is the embodiment of unconquerable gentleness, unbendable devotion, and boundless faith. For love she will brave all, and then die without a murmur!

The poet has conveyed in scattered touches a general impression of Desdemona's blameless beauty. But is this enough for us? Are we satisfied to find ourselves face to face with a picture of immaculate purity, with a woman even holier than the "chaste Lucrece" herself? I think not. The ideal is the only real.

But *we* must *make* it so. And thus the individual heart once enamoured of this heavenly innocent must needs fill in the poet's outline according to its own peculiar fancy. It must strive to reanimate *in all its features* a figure so perfectly ideal; and endeavour to feel in some degree afresh, as he re-peruses the touching story, the immortal charm of a presence that, rising out of the mist of her past troubles, still lives and loves for it alone. Let me, then, attempt to vivify by rearrangement the original conception of the play, and bring out in greater detail the face and the form of Brabantio's child as she haunts the fancy in our better moods.

Her head is crowned with smooth, compactly braided tresses, "more black than ashbuds in the front of March." And beneath this gleaming wealth of hair, encircled by a fillet of filigree and pearl, there shines out upon Othello a pale elegiac countenance beautifully still, gently sun-browned, but suffused with rose, so faint and delicate that it alone resembles "the small suspicion of a blush that doubtfully begins." But the power and passion of this face lie mostly in the black beseeching eyes with their long curved lashes, and the humid, amorous, firmly chiselled lips that have the exquisite curves of Cupid's bow. Eyes that slow and languid in their motion have still great depths of meaning in them; full of love-pain and sweet anguish, of poetry and divine enticement; full also of subdued fire and liquid softness, like the acanthus of Pliny or the "azured harebell" of Cymbeline's young son. Rich jetty lashes of great length, that drooping from the restful lids which lie like rosy petals drifted by the breeze beneath the arched and olive-tinted eaves of her broad and lustrous brow, half-veil those starry-looking Cenci eyes. And lips that, full and ripe and red as cherries in September, disclose the daintiest whiteness of pearly teeth, and seem made for kissing, not for questioning—a voluptuous softness in their pouting fulness.

Nor must I forget to notice the rounded neck and the dimpled arm; or the delicately insistent curves of nose and nostril, that bespeak the spirituality of her nature; or the pink-white deep-breasted bosom, lustrous and shapely as the glossy softly tinted doves that whirl round the well-poised domes of the Salute, or

cling and flutter among the marble foliage and fantastic sculptures of the porches of Saint Mark. Add to all these features a figure upright and lissom, moulded in the perfection of womanly softness, but now dilating with the energy of awe and admiration; a sweet, wooing, girlish voice, "silvery as tongue can troll," and ever making blameless melody; and a peculiar grace of manner and of motion—so rhythmical, voluptuous, and pliant that it seems almost more charming than the beauty of her genial person with its perfect poise and Hebe bloom,—and you will have some faint conception at least of that "divine Desdemona" whom Shakespeare has created, and whom since all honest hearts have loved and pitied.

At first one might compare her sweet, rounded, blossom-perfect face to the pale chaste primrose. For is not the crest and legend of this simple floweret also rightfully hers—*Sancta simplicitas*: a beauteous type of early youth and sadness come too soon; a sad symbol of premature decay and early death? Later, during her one hour of love, she resembles, from the vital tenacity yet flower-soft loveliness with which she clings for support to Othello, the lush and luscious woodbine gently entwisted round the "gnarled and unwedgeable oak." But in the end you can only liken her to a withered lotus or Sacred Lily flower—pathetic symbol of estranged love, of the faith that is dead, and the short-lived gladness of a world unworn! Always, however, as a flower. Fair, fragrant, and famous, she sheds a brightness and bloom on every passing life like the white June roses of her own loved Venice: a beauty that is always new, yet withal a beauty that is transient to sense and sight as the night-blooming Cereus of the New World, with its intense warmth and its vivid colours that quickly gradate from gay to grave! To this crowning blossom of Venetian girlhood, then, the brave Moorish commander, forgetting, or entirely disregarding, his swarthy cheek and warlike visage and declining years, yields up his life and all.[1]

[1] I need hardly say that this sketch of Desdemona is imaginary: like the sculptured imagery of the chamber-lamp in "Christabel,"

"All carvéd from the carver's brain."

Yet not altogether the fabrication of my own dreams, to which a reverent study

II.

But here arises an important question. The surpassing loveliness of Desdemona naturally enough explains the sudden and engrossing passion of the Moor, independent altogether of other considerations. But how account for the eager self-surrender of a beautiful and gently nurtured girl to one whose exterior we should suppose offers but little to attract or charm the female eye?

Very much has been said as to the unfitness of the match on account of the obvious disparity of age, character, country, and complexion. So strong does this objection seem that her father affirms before the Senate that magic has had part and place in all the General's wooing. Just as the classical poet saw fit to account for the sudden affection of Dido for Æneas by the introduction of some more than human influence—by the intervention in point of fact of Cupid the god of love himself—so the angry Brabantio accuses the Moor of having had recourse to "spells and medicines bought of mountebanks," and "mixtures powerful o'er the blood," in order to bring about the complete subversion of so dutiful a child. She whom he had found "opposite to marriage" with "the curled darlings" of Venice, *must* have been entrapped by magic or enchantments of the fiend.

> "She, in spite of nature,
> Of years, of country, credit, everything,
> To fall in love with what she feared to look on,"

he exclaims, as if conviction must perforce attend his words!

of female beauty during a brief sojourn in Italy may have given rise. For, as the reader will at once discover, the basis of my sketch is to be found in the speeches of those around her, as well as in the impression directly conveyed by the poet's own characterisation. And those features and tokens of womanly merit which I have specially emphasised in my ideal portrait have at least received due prominence in the paintings of Egg and Hofmann—highly wrought pictorial products which display poetic insight, extent of vision, grasp of subject, and loftiness of aim. Excellent engravings of these may be seen in a beautiful book entitled 'The Heroines of Shakespeare,' published by Messrs Ward & Lock; and in Dowden's 'Scenes and Characters: a Series of Illustrations with Explanatory Text,' published in 1876 by Messrs Macmillan & Co. —a magnificent and costly book.

To Brabantio, who forgets that love is the most powerful of all spells, and that his daughter was wooed and won under his very eyes in situations of his own devising, the whole antecedents and environment of this redeemed and abducting slave point to Desdemona's love for him being out of the course of nature, and a direct violation of all human probabilities. It is something more serious than an abnormal caprice: not to be attained therefore without the intervention of supernatural aids and illicit means such as the "arts inhibited" of sorcery and witchcraft. And Brabantio's *a priori* objections have furnished texts for a school of critics who, classing him with "bond slaves and pagans," have parrot-like revived the quite untenable doctrine of the essential unfitness of Othello's match. Their criticism is tinged with something of the hollow scepticism of the Iagoish mind; and they virtually ask with him, "What delight shall she have to look on the devil?" I do not propose to degrade the subject by anything like critical attorneyship. I shall simply put the answer that suggests itself to my mind, in respect of this often-alleged disparity, in a few words addressed as much to the heart as the head of my reader.

In the first place, then, consider that Othello is a Mauritanian prince; a man who can claim a royal ancestry. "I fetch my life and being from men of royal siege," he says, thus establishing an equality in respect of rank with the proud senator whose servant for the nonce he is. And besides, those military services which he has already rendered to the Signiory of Venice in the bloody wars against the Turks—services which the Moor himself declares will more than out-tongue Brabantio's violent complaints against him—have of themselves raised him to a position of undoubted influence and independent authority. The Senate of the Republic has exceptionally honoured this victorious warrior, who is reputed to be high in virtue as in renown. His loyal and valorous deeds at Rhodes, at Cyprus, and Aleppo have been in every mouth; and his almost fabulous history has been trumpeted to the whole world. He has made himself indispensable to the State. He is now regarded as "all in all sufficient" by the Senate. Like Macbeth in the days of his innocence, he has

won "golden opinions from all sorts of people." Before the ducal splendour and the senatorial greatness of the queenly city of his adoption he can therefore stand unmoved and unabashed. Proudly conscious of the regal magnificence and the almost barbaric glory of his own past, his every word and action becomes instinct with that persistent self-trust which is rightly enough defined as the essence of true heroism. Boldly he will walk through the world, trusting in all things to the counsel of his own bosom. And even in respect of the beautiful girl whom he has wooed and won he can say, in the knowledge of his own rectitude, and in defiance of all the threats and accusations of the enraged magnifico, that his "demerits [*i.e.*, his deserts] may speak unbonneted to as proud a fortune as this" that he has reached.

2 • Then, again, this high and chivalrous Moor is not *black* but *tawny*. This has been accepted as an established fact on a previous page. But even were this not so, Othello's complexion —granting for the moment that it is as "sooty" as Brabantio in his anger would fain make out—is not able of itself to excite any feeling of repulsion in the compassionate heart of the fair Venetian. For Desdemona in a certain sense pays no heed whatever to the exterior of the man. She has no eye for what in most cases would appear displeasing and unacceptable. In the downright violence of her passion she concerns herself only with "his honours and his ~~valiant parts.~~" Love transcends the mere unworthy husk of humanity, and dwells and broods, with magnanimity and trust, on the spiritual and immortal part. Penetrating the ungracious surface aspect, she discovers an intrinsic nobleness and the most attractive graces of character. She has caught the true glance of his eye; and, guided by its sincerity, tenderness, truth, and courage, she "sees Othello's visage in his *mind*." Nay, more, in her impatience to suck a sudden sweetness, she resembles Juliet, and takes the initiative in the wooing. The valour and manly power of Othello provoke her passionate admiration and compassion. Having once heard his story, she wishes that Heaven had made her such a man; and then she bids him, if he has a friend that loves her, to teach him how to

tell this moving tale, and *that* will win her! The austere laws of nature and convention are thus burned up, so to speak, in the exceptional ardour of her impressible and sensitive heart!

Then, finally, as regards Othello's age. He has certainly declined into the vale of years; he has outlived the age of the passions; and is perhaps in consequence of this also an unlikely husband for so young a girl. The bright colour, the *lumen purpureum juventæ*, is gone; and all the silken bravery of youth, with its passionate hopes and feverish aspirations, its uneasy pleasures and fine pains, has vanished. But then as the beauty of woman is such as oftentimes to make an aged man young again, so the true hero is never old to the genuine female heart. In the middle of a Babylonian rout Jane Welsh Carlyle can reverently kiss the shoulder of the Iron Duke [1]—a most graceful and delicate act of hero-worship that has something in it of Desdemona's temper of mind. For

> "She loved me for the dangers I had pass'd,
> And I loved her that she did pity them."

Such is Othello's simple and natural explanation of this romantic matter. These two lines, as a writer who has laboriously sounded the depths of the feminine heart has said, "comprise whole volumes of sentiment and metaphysics." [2] Othello, like the shipwrecked Ulysses narrating his history to Queen Arete and her daughter Nausicaa in the court of Alcinous, or Launcelot relating his adventures to the Lord of Astolat and the lily maid Elaine, or—to take a more apposite example still—like Æneas recounting to the Tyrian queen the sufferings of the Trojan heroes, the later history of the siege and fall of Troy, and his own escape and seven years' wanderings, tells his pitiful story to a heart that has ears to hear the forceful underworkings of his awakened passion. And Desdemona, as suddenly and irremedi-

[1] "One evening, at Bath House, I saw her in a grand *soirée*, softly step up, and (unnoticed as she thought by anybody) kiss the old Duke of Wellington's shoulder! That perhaps was one of the prettiest things I ever saw there." —See 'Reminiscences by Thomas Carlyle,' edited by James Anthony Froude. ii. 202.

[2] Mrs Jameson, 'Characteristics of Women,' 227.

ably love-stricken as the unhappy Dido herself, becomes, as we have seen, an eager listener to the tale; drinks in his words until her heart is brimful of tenderness and pity; and then, like the Carthaginian queen, fondly nurses in her bosom the passion which is fated to be her ruin.

> "That I did love the Moor to live with him,
> My downright violence and storm of fortunes
> May trumpet to the world: my heart's subdued
> Even to the very quality of my lord:
> I saw Othello's visage in his mind,
> And to his honours and his valiant parts
> Did I my soul and fortunes consecrate."

You see, then, that it is the manly and heroic simplicity of this man, who has suffered and borne so much, that attracts and captivates the maiden's heart. And let me say, as the crowning answer to all objectors, that in this exquisite combination of simple bravery and unquestioning gentleness and trust, in this rare blending of genuine manliness and genuine womanliness, we perceive the happiest of all possible earthly unions, since, as Mr Hudson says, "the stout, valiant soul is the chosen home of reverence and tenderness."

III.

Compared with Desdemona, the ideal women of ancient art, —the Antigone and Electra of Sophocles, for example, or the Iphigenia and Helena of the supposed misogynist Euripides—even she who is distinctively spoken of as "the fairest and most loving wife in Greece,"—are, with all their purity and piety, with all their queenly dignity and heart-moving loveliness, essentially harsh and masculine to the modern eye. These "far-renowned brides of ancient song" act rightly and nobly, it is true, but for the most part they are either shadowy and unreal or ostentatious, disputative, and unfeminine. They are deficient in delicacy of heart and refinement of habit. They lack the finer womanly sensibilities, the trustful submissiveness, and the purely passive courage of the Venetian maiden. We do not discover in them the broad

humanity, the swift insight into the world-weighted soul, the divine quality of compassion for suffering, which are among the most salient characteristics of Shakespeare's women. The Greek poets give us types of heroic virtues and tragic passions, and touching illustrations of motherly and wifely devotion. But woman is not recognised or represented as a profound spiritual force. And the attachment of the Sophoclean lovers, Hæmon and Antigone,—the one patiently hopeless, the other calmly awaiting a sacrifice, and both the victims of a stern Nemesis and irreparable fate,—although portrayed with all the delicacy and clearness of the Hellenic instinct, must always appear cold and tame to any one who reflects on the strong impassioned love of Othello and his bride.

As regards brightness and beauty, purity and pious passion, a calm and dispassionate survey will, I think, put Desdemona, in whom we discover traces of woman's deeper spiritual life, far in advance of the average character and position of Athenian women as these are portrayed by the most popular powers of Grecian art. Indeed it may be said that the possible beauty of the female character awaited Shakespeare's revelation and unfolding. It was his to paint or carve fine female figures from the life, and inspire the worn-out imagination of mankind with the genuine heart-reaching poetry of abused but blameless womanhood. Desdemona is a brilliant example of his moral insight and artistic power. She exists as a masterpiece of art unparagoned by the finest characters in antique tragedy: so sensitive, finely tempered, tender, and true, that Cassio, giving expression to a general conviction, speaks of her as the "divine Desdemona," because, I apprehend, she reflects with exceptional grace and fulness the appropriate beauty of the female nature, whose crowning excellence consists in an invincible devotion to moral ideals.

But whilst thus overtopping as an ideal portrait of feminine worth the fine statuesque models of womanhood that have proceeded from the hands of the Attic poets, Desdemona does not occupy the foremost place in our poet's own priceless portrait-gallery. She is not, in other words, the most interesting of

Shakespeare's maids and matrons. And this for obvious reasons. This motherless girl is modest, humble, patient, generous, reticent, and forgiving; a creature of "most blessed conditions," as Cassio expressly says. But her lively fancy and compassionate impressibility render her excessively open to the hypocritical overtures of the malicious or the more cruel deceptions of the malignant. Busying herself entirely, too, with woman's duties, she knows little or nothing of woman's rights. She does what is proper instinctively, constantly, and without motive; whilst the mystical or sentimental tendencies of her nature have effectually crippled or destroyed the reflective or calculative faculty.

Guiltless of guile herself, she is unable to conceive iniquity in others, as we very plainly see from the modest disavowal of all knowledge concerning the unholy underworkings of wedded life in Venice which she makes during that strange colloquy with the free-fancier Emilia in the third scene of the fourth Act. No element of impurity can find a lodgment in this chaste and high-born soul. Though temptations are not wanting, Desdemona's virtue remains unstrained and unassailable. In the most trying and ticklish situations, amidst the sharpest perils and adversities, the moral element of her beauty shines out steadily, and her goodness knows no stress. Just as there is a large class of substances which are almost insensible to the polar force of magnetism, so her heart remains uninfluenced by Iago's devilish insinuations and festering guilt, and Emilia's revolting vanities and porcine pruriencies of speech, which fall innocuously upon her mind as the purest and most harmless mirth. She will neither yield to the veiled flatteries of the one nor the playful but shamefully Ovidian suggestions of the other. Indeed she not only refuses to receive, but is absolutely unable to suspect the presence of a deadly venom in the tail of their wit. Her compassionate tenderness is unrestrained by anything like suspicion. Susceptible, perhaps, to praise, but incapable of duplicity, she readily reposes confidence in the hollowest professors. And her simple and easy belief is not altogether the result of inexperience, but of her own innate and ingenuous confidence, which has been strengthened and confirmed by that deeper and finer

insight into spiritual things which her somewhat solitary girl's life in Venice has engendered.

But her purity, meekness, and magnanimity render her an easy prey to every base practice. These qualities act as the loadstone to attract all the brutish, covetous, and contentious motive-force that works in that Incarnate Evil who stands beside her callous and steel-hearted. For it is out of her own goodness that Iago weaves the all-enmeshing web of his consummate devilry. And since, ignorant of the world's ways, she trusts only to the inspirations of her own pure heart, she is unable even to suspect that she is suspected, so as to forearm herself against that death-dealing weight of agony and woe which is so soon to come upon her. She can do and suffer for others, but she has little strength to help herself. She is unresenting and unresisting. Defenceless in her innocence, she can only prove her ability to be silent and to bear with serene patience the weight of her accumulated wrongs. For she has little of that firmness, or that unhesitating openness of speech which we are always too apt to suppose must necessarily accompany conscious rectitude.

So far, then, Desdemona is a beautiful, consistent, finely distinguished character. But she is not the greatest woman in the Shakespearian drama. Innocent she is; but faultless she is not. And even in respect of great outstanding qualities many others either equal or surpass her. It is not my province, under the limited task I have here assumed, to illustrate with anything like elaboration a point which would certainly form a most interesting subject for detailed study. It is sufficient for my present purpose simply to remark that not a few of the poet's female *personæ* have a single and distinguishing element of peculiar strength which raises them, not only to a level of equality with her, but advances them to a position even higher than that which Desdemona occupies.

The eager, rapid, self-surrendering passion of Juliet, and the simplicity and artless tenderness of Miranda; the self-sustained virtue of Hermione, and the strong will and fervent self-forgetting love of Helena; the softness and sensibility of Rosalind, and the intellect and wit of Beatrice; the energy, reflection, and feeling

of Portia of Belmont, and the sentiment and elegance of Perdita; the invincible filial loyalty and delicate reserve and unconquerable piety of Cordelia, and the fixity of character, the moral grandeur, and the saintly grace of Isabella,—are representative qualities which make an irresistible claim upon our heart's best sympathies and affections, and even lead us, in some instances at least, to raise the tender beings who are animated and made lovely by them above the highly sustained ideal of Desdemona herself.

And what shall be said of dazzling Imogen, the "sweet, rosy lad," and the "page so kind, so duteous-diligent;" the lady and the princess and the wife all in one? Why, this radiant type of stainless and eloquent womanhood reveals a harmony of many qualities rarely found in union—quickness and brightness of intellect with delicacy and loftiness of imagination; incorruptible goodness with the daintiest beauty; dignity and constancy with tenderness and passion and the priceless gift of song. She, in a word, is the most charming and correctly drawn female character of the Shakespearian drama: an earthly paragon of exquisitely collected grace and strength, of whom, more truly than of Perdita, it may, in the poet's own words, be said, that

> "Women will love her, that she is a woman
> More worth than any man; men, that SHE IS
> THE RAREST OF ALL WOMEN."

But the reader must not misunderstand me. I am not endeavouring to detract from the inner value and the moral worth of Desdemona's character. I am simply attempting to give her her rightful place in the long list of Shakespeare's females. Several, as we have seen, are quite as interesting as she; and there is at least one peerless woman to whose name and worth the discriminating critic will naturally pay much greater homage. But in all her affecting relations with Othello we discover a resemblance to another woman not yet named, who is also indubitably a noble woman, because, like the fair Venetian, she is a perfect wife. And it is this affinity which I meanwhile desire to bring out, since, as will presently appear,

it helps to illustrate and enforce what I ventured to advance in respect of the Moor at the close of the preceding chapter.

This woman, then, is Portia of Rome, Cato's daughter and Brutus' wife: a woman who exhibits the same proud frowardness which distinguishes Desdemona at the outset, yet one who likewise displays the same sensitive pain and tender solicitude for those she loves; and sharing, though less energetically, the political principles of her husband, strongly urges her wifely right to share his purposes and cares.[1] True, there is in the character under consideration none of that stoical fortitude which enables this passive conspirator, "so father'd and so husbanded," secretly to make a wound in her thigh as an exercise and proof of her constancy and manlike hardihood and contempt of death or danger. But there is the same womanly care and virtuous watchfulness, the same rare tenderness, innocence, fidelity, and wifely trust; and a similar veneration of moral ideals.

As Portia the Roman matron is to the great triumvir the high ideal he would fain become himself, so Desdemona the Venetian magnifico's child is to the Moor the incarnation of the highest motives. And as Brutus, the amiable but impetuous political idealist, can imprecate the gods to render him worthy of his noble wife, so Othello, the virtuous but fiery-hearted warrior, looking upon Desdemona as "the cunningest pattern of excelling nature," can calmly set his life upon her faith as being in very truth his "soul's joy";—"the fountain from the which his current runs." In Othello and Desdemona indeed, as truly as in this other Roman pair, we discover all the beauty and dignity of conjugal faith, and perceive a strong mutual capacity for making of wedded life a helpful and a passionate moral harmony.

To Othello, whose ideas of beauty are essentially moral, the physical perfection of Desdemona, who first appears to him as a vision of the loveliness and kindness of Nature, is the outward and eloquent token of her inner worth: a vital index of the moral purity and majesty of her emotions. In other words, it is typical of divine attributes and a perfect exponent

[1] See Professor Dowden on "Shakespeare's Portraiture of Women" in the 'Contemporary Review' for April 1885.

of her ethical state. And thus it not only brings him eventually within the reach of those benign domestic influences to which he has hitherto been a stranger, but at once places him under the dominion of a mysterious and exalting law. He moves submissively to a summons that is more authoritative than any mere personal emotion, and indirectly acknowledges a "high allegiance, higher than his love."

And it is noteworthy that here, as in the case of Brutus and his wife, both the lovers are equally distinguished by this noble sensibility to moral beauty. Just as Desdemona, loving the immortal part of him, sees Othello's "visage in his mind," so he, realising in her his ideal of victorious and consummated beauty, discerns the spirit and intelligence of moral life: that pure, all-seeing, ever-womanly, but indescribable power that "leadeth us upward and on," as Goethe sings at the conclusion of "Faust." Love is the life-spirit of her spirit, and its heavenliest outcome is Trust. She loses herself at once in a supreme and permanent affection. She does not manifest the obedience of compulsory law, but the voluntarily yielded obedience to spiritual persuasion. To his honours and his valiant parts she has with affectionate force—or, in her own phrase, by "downright violence"—consecrated her soul and her fortunes.

Othello has therefore a godlike faith in the delicacy, constancy, purity of woman. A supreme affection is with him the palladium of every human soul which virtue makes impregnable. Socrates affirmed that love is "the desire of the eternal possession of *the good*." And just as the Grecian sage was instructed by Diotima of Mantaneia, and thus rose above the mere love of beautiful forms to the nobler love of holy thoughts and good deeds, so the Moor becomes the pupil of a woman, and is taught by Desdemona of Venice this true doctrine concerning human love. Heaven with all its bliss lies in her soft fair bosom. Desdemona is to him the emblem and the hope of eternity: "a wonder, and a beauty, and a terror" all in one; pure, gentle of heart, adorable!

Othello, then, loves beauty. But in the final analysis you will find that it is the moral element of the Beautiful that

acts as the loadstar in all the wooing of this warlike soul. Her grace, he perceives, is grafted on something deeper, better, more abiding than symmetry and proportion of form and feature, or delicacy and refinement of manner. Her beauty is not simply an external garment but an instrument of direct spiritual instruction to him. And to the purest spirits it is always so. Man governs and earns the glory. But it is woman who creates it for him. She exalts and vivifies all human passion; and the inspirations of her character ennoble and enlarge us all. From her comes the serious mind, the grateful and enduring heart, the fortitude and the faith. To think, to hope, to love and pray—these are the things that most surely bring us happiness and peace; and more or less she is the inspirer of them all. Hence Heine has wisely remarked that "where the woman stops, the bad man begins."

The truth of all this is abundantly proved by the case before us. Othello's occupation, usefulness, honour, life depend entirely on the sustaining powers of womanhood. Without Desdemona he feels that he could no longer sustain with effect his part in life. The pride, pomp, and circumstance of glorious war are as nothing when compared with the honour which Desdemona's preference has suddenly conferred upon him. Her virtue has raised him, and her love has inspired him. She has given him the peace for which he yearned; and he has therefore made of her a faith. And beyond this reverence for what is morally above him—the true basis, observe, of the ethnic religion—his spiritual development cannot be traced. Living a new life in Desdemona, of whose *purity* he is meanwhile no less assured than he is of her *beauty* or her *love*, which, as the sequel shows, unkindness may defeat but never taint; and having in point of fact been seized with a sort of blissful stupefaction which overwhelms every other thought and feeling, he exclaims with oriental rapture—

> "If it were now to die,
> 'Twere now to be most happy; for, I fear,
> My soul hath her content so absolute,
> That not another comfort like to this
> Succeeds in unknown fate."

IV.

But this transport of content is but a passing ebullition. Othello's cup of joy is too full for such a high-wrought soul to carry. A torturing frenzy, hopeless and mortal, swiftly succeeds this blissful ecstasy; and those honeyed words of love grate somewhat harshly on our memory when we see him borne down by the weight of an intolerable conviction, and hear him exclaiming with heart-broken and heart-breaking anguish, "O Desdemona, away, away, away!" Such confidence, and such love! and yet, all betrayed! Ah, it is sad to think that with this wedded lover so "well-tuned now" the doting should so soon give place to doubting; and that the foul lie of a white-livered knave whom he has too readily trusted should blast the bud and blossom of his love, and doom to death the "sweetest innocent that e'er did lift up eye."

Yet so it is. Othello's love for Desdemona becomes an agony when, thoroughly infected by the dragon-breath of the Ancient's slanders, he is forced to regard her as wrecked, faded, and defiled. Her moral ruin, he assumes, is so complete, and his own pain is in consequence so great, that the idea of her restoration or of his ultimate assuagement is never for a moment thought of.

> "She's gone; I am abused, and my relief
> Must be to loathe her."

There is no forgiveness for such a fault; no remedy for such a grief; no relief but bitterest loathing for a heart that has loved so tenderly. Instantly he falls away from his allegiance, entangled in the Ancient's net; and thus through Iago's "gain'd knowledge" or excess of *wisdom* Othello is, as he predicted, made a fool!

The Moor, remember, had pledged his life on the inviolable faith of this fair creature. He had confidently relied on the sustaining powers of her chaste woman's nature. And this trust once shaken or betrayed, the Titan suddenly feels that he is rudely shorn of *all* his strength. Order is swiftly turned into disorder, and all social ties are rent asunder. His occupation is

gone, and his true life therefore ends. For him ambition has no longer aim or finality. His ideals are shattered, his hopes are withered, his aims are blasted, his loadstars blotted out. For unfaith in the goodness and purity of Desdemona—she who was to him the fairest thing on earth, the one animating power, the one glorious hope in his perilous life of storm and pressure—

> "A gentle tone
> Amid rude voices—a beloved light,
> A solitude, a refuge, a delight"[1]—

means in truth a total want of faith in all things. "Chaos is come again!" Or, at least, hard-eyed in his despair, he now sees in everything the reflection of his own dark and chaotic feelings.

And how skilfully does the poet cause his good nature and his chaotic mood to display themselves by turns here! How he has made the old love to linger, that thereby his coarse aspersions and his violent threats may be purged of their grossness! With unspeakable constriction of heart Othello still scents from afar the perfume of that once sinless Eden wherein he found delight. But he will seek no more a fellowship where he never had a true share. He will cast it from him for ever, and endeavour even to renounce, as too painful for endurance, the memory of his short-lived happiness, and trample under foot the being whose love and beauty had brought it to him:—

> "O thou weed
> Who art so lovely fair, and smell'st so sweet
> That the sense aches at thee, would thou had'st ne'er been born!"

In this way, through manifold varieties of expression, the higher and the lower nature which possess the Moor alternately assert themselves. He reflects on the love, honour, strength, and magnificence of his Past, and perforce contrasts these things with the perfidy, debasement, impotence, deformity of his ill-starred Present; and groans under the ineffable horror of the one great fact which it presents that the once pure and free fountain from the which his current runs or else dries up has at last become

[1] Shelley, "Epipsychidion," l. 71.

"A cistern for foul toads
To knot and gender in."

He is thus pitilessly stricken in the plenitude of his grandeur, in the heyday of his love: robbed of his strength and hope and faith—beggared of his all! Hercules himself was even mortal we must remember; and the pang of his weakness was augmented by the memory of his strength.

But it is not the mere alienation of Desdemona that occasions Othello's grief; but, as I have already indicated, her supposed lapse of virtue: her loss of that which made her as one "ensky'd and sainted," on whose faith his life might safely rest. He sees a thick film of dishonour clouding the purity and splendour of her star-like soul. And it is this that moves him. For the intensity or continuance of her affection is of less consequence to him than its purity or moral elevation. "If she be false, O, then, heaven mocks itself," he says, when describing the peculiarity and intensity of his calamity; and, pitiful beyond all pity, mourns over *her own* downfall.

This is put beyond all question when that terrible gasping sob rises from his noble and heroic soul, and his anguish voices itself in those pathetic, dirge-like words which have shaken with grief a whole world, "But yet the *pity* of it, Iago! O Iago! the *pity* of it, Iago!" There is nothing in all our literature equal to this heart-broken and despairing cry. Something has suddenly snapped asunder in the great heart; and this sad note, the echo of its breaking, fills up the measure of Othello's woe. And his words have in them such a hushed expression, seemingly so out of keeping with the resistant energy of his "waked wrath," that one cannot fail to understand that they imply something more than mere mourning for the lost love and the broken faith and the trust so cruelly betrayed. Who can fail to see that through all the mighty surgings of his sorrowing soul pity still struggles with the pain? Unawares he has awakened to the terrible truth that something has escaped from the world and from him which can never more be rescued and restored; that her virtue, which gave her kinship with the saints, has been down-trampled into dusty nothing, and sunk for ever in the adder's-hole of lechery

and lust. It is the fleet fading of this fairest flower of all her beauty, then, that wrings from his heart, submerged by sorrow, those words of deepest moan which, breathed by the music-making lips of a Salvini — the one great and irreproachable Othello this country has seen [1]—pass into the heart and brain

[1] There were kings before Agamemnon, and actors before Salvini, but it may be fairly questioned whether any other artist has ever given such a natural and realistic rendering of this character. Coleridge said that to see Edmund Kean act was "like reading Shakespeare by flashes of lightning." And to the great Italian the remark may be applied with equal, if not with greater, truth. When Kean played the *rôle* of Othello, we are told that the frenzied agony of the Moor threw Lord Byron into a swoon. I have certainly not witnessed any demonstration of so pronounced a nature; but I can certify that when I first saw Salvini playing the part in Glasgow many years ago, several persons of both sexes were obliged to leave the theatre under the influence of strong nervous excitement. I was then impressed with the idea—and subsequent experiences have persuaded me of its essential soundness and truth—that Signor Salvini's interpretation is at once the most tender, passionate, and intellectual that British playgoers have ever been privileged to witness. And yet Mr Ruskin, in a recent letter of 'Fors Clavigera,' which bears the heading "Dust of Gold" (viii. 187), incidentally alludes to "Salvini's frightful, and radically false, interpretation of Othello." I have the greatest admiration for Mr Ruskin's genius, and in certain directions I repose the greatest confidence in the correctness of his taste and judgment. But at the same time, I am satisfied that his chivalric enthusiasm, which is apt to degenerate into blind partisanship, has oftentimes led him into regions of fatuity and excess. One cannot forget that it was he who spoke of Mrs Browning's last great poem, 'Aurora Leigh,' as superior to Tennyson's "In Memoriam" or any other lengthy poem of our time; and that it was likewise he who characterised Sir Walter Scott as the greatest philosopher of his age! On many occasions, too, Mr Ruskin has demonstrated that dramatic criticism is not his *forte;* and, I think, at no time more clearly than in September 1883, the date of the letter above referred to. The Othello of this artist—a performance that far excels his well-known impersonation of the Thracian Niger in "The Gladiator," or his still more celebrated representation of Corado in "La Morte Civile," which by some critics is rashly adjudged his most admirable artistic achievement—has been described in this wise by a most competent critic: "From first to last you are face to face with a living, breathing, sentient human creature; you feel the depth of Othello's love, the completeness of his trust, the horror of his abuse, the complete and dreadful poignancy of his agony. It is heroic and romantic, but *it is profoundly and terribly true.*" Now with this opinion I entirely agree. Indeed, after much attentive study of Salvini's acting I go farther, and venture to say that of the various actors who have appeared in this the most arduous of all Shakespeare's parts, no one has been so fired and thrilled with the life and passion of the hapless, lofty-minded Moor; no

never more to be forgotten. And in that awful last scene of revelation and retribution all this is still more clearly revealed to us. We then discover what it is that he most prizes in Desdemona;

one has acted in the same style of reality and earnest naturalness; no one has been so successful, in a word, in throwing "a flash of lightning" on the poet's meaning. No known performance of any great tragedian is so full of insight, grace, and force; and no success recorded in the annals of the playhouse was ever more complete than his. And I firmly believe that when the playgoers of the next generation come to criticise the memory of the past, it will not be David Garrick but Tommaso Salvini who will be found entitled to wear the crown of traditionary excellence. Even now very few indeed will feel disposed, I think, to ratify Mr Ruskin's dictum. The *popular* verdict has already placed the Italian player far above those great Joves of our theatrical galaxy whom our forefathers and a few contemporaries were wont to worship before his arrival on our shores—Garrick, Kean, Kemble, Fechter, Booth, and Irving. Garrick's eccentric, disillusionising performance may well be dismissed from consideration by simply repeating the sardonic exclamation of Dr Johnson, "Pompey, why where's the tea-tray?" At the time it was no doubt unequalled—the small slight figure, the coal-black face, and the eighteenth-century court-suit of England notwithstanding; but, according to the testimony of those best able to form an opinion, it was not such a performance as could well justify the declaration of his worshippers that he was an actor who would never have a rival. Edmund Kean's representation, whilst eminently passionate and picturesque, was still open to the objection which Hazlitt strongly urged against it, that it was *all* passion and energy, "too uniformly on the verge of extravagance, too constantly on the rack." Of Kemble's performance it suffices to say that it was a judicious and intelligent reading of the part, for which, however, he was naturally unfitted (see 'Temple Bar' for July 1884, 373); whilst Fechter, who had undoubtedly a fine talent, was a terribly sensational Othello, and much given, I believe, to monotonous loudness and vehemence. Indeed he merely touched the skin of the character, instead of going to its marrow as Salvini does. Edwin Booth, the distinguished American tragedian, again, notoriously lacks that nobility and majesty of demeanour which forms one of the salient characteristics of the Moor. Except in certain passages—for instance, the beautiful apostrophe, "Then, oh, farewell," &c.—he betrays a decided deficiency in tenderness and pathos. He is altogether fierce and tumultuous, with nothing even of grandeur or terror in his passion; essentially an actor, not of feeling but of intellect. And of Mr Henry Irving much the same may be said. It is true that, notwithstanding his stilted mannerisms, he comes somewhat nearer than Booth to the true man of Shakespeare's making; but, whilst properly understanding his author's conception, he is also sadly deficient in the power of giving it a true and adequate expression. As a lady once remarked to Mr F. J. Furnivall (see his Introduction to the 'Leopold Shakespeare,' p. lxxvi *note*), "Salvini *is* Othello; Irving *acts* him." And that, I think, without farther examining into the several varieties of expression which have marked the acting of those who have in successive generations

we then understand the true nature of his loss, and the true meaning of his mourning.

"Nay, *had she been true*,[1]
If Heaven would make me such another world
Of *one entire and perfect chrysolite*,
I'd not have sold her for it."

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played the part of the hero, sufficiently represents the true state of the case, not only in respect of Mr Irving, but also in respect of his predecessors. By birth, taste, and training, the Italian *is* the Othello after Shakespeare's own heart. Not only is his style of acting such as one should expect from a Southerner—stately, elaborate, impassioned—but his very appearance is singularly well adapted to give life and all the requisite touches of reality to this marvellous creation. He has all the natural qualifications that an actor most requires, all the truest elements of histrionic strength—a handsome and highly expressive face; wonderful eyes, full of fire and splendour; a flexible figure, finely proportioned, full of dignity and power; a charming grace of manner and of motion; a noble and majestic bearing in all the swiftly changing crises of his passion; and an incomparable voice that always ravishes the ear with the most melodious elocution. In brief, Signor Salvini is the Œdipus of this perplexing part. He has not simply given a finished interpretation of it, but he has grasped its inmost meaning in its fulness, and even heightened the moral and intellectual magic of the poet's work. His performance has nothing in it of a partial nature; it is a great artistic *whole*, almost ideally perfect. And the one living actor who has most nearly approached him is not, as some have asserted, Henry Irving or Edwin Booth, but Ernesto Rossi, his accomplished compatriot, who at Naples and elsewhere has, I understand, given a singularly fine conception of the immortal Moor. Till I have an opportunity of judging of *his* impersonation I shall, in the words of Lodovico applied to his great original, continue to regard Signor Salvini as "all in all sufficient."

[1] Let me here point out that the unveracity of the "divine Desdemona" is a potent factor in the tragedy; with her imprudence it aids and abets the malignant stratagems of the Ancient. In her courtship she probably practised some craft and cunning both in word and deed. For Brabantio declares at the close of the Council scene, "She has deceived her father, and may thee." His daughter has forsaken him and given him no sign; and his beloved guest has—though perhaps we can well afford to forgive Othello this much—stooped to an act of disloyalty and secretly withdrawn her from his home. And the result? Lodovico tells us that the "match was mortal to him"; whilst Desdemona, when reflecting on the past after her husband has outraged her (Act iv. sc. 2), says, "'Tis meet I should be used so, very meet!" Retribution and repentance are thus distinctly suggested by the poet. But the presumed pre-nuptial habit of dissimulation continues and increases after her marriage. When

Iago has troubled his blood and ensnared his imagination. He now believes in the absolute dominion of grossness over goodness and purity. And this devilry that has no conscience, and this new belief that has seized his soul and crushed out mercy, and caused him to float in a sea of doubts, act together to bring down all his soaring hopes and enthusiastic aspirations after the better part of human nature, as the lifeless air and the pestiferous vapours of the Sea of Sodom are said to drag down the strong-winged birds that hover over its dark-blue bosom. His great heart feels the devastating blasts of cruel passions. Othello cannot longer breathe this foul distempered air and live!

> "Excellent wretch! Perdition catch my soul,
> But I do love thee; *and when I love thee not,*
> *Chaos is come again.*"

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difficulties present themselves she evades the truth from a sort of natural timidity, and openly toys with falsehood:

> "I am not merry, but I do beguile
> The thing I am, *by seeming otherwise.*"

Even her archness and coquettish rebelliousness partakes largely of false colouring. She alleges that in the days of Othello's wooing she has often spoken of him "dispraisingly" to Cassio, who was their go-between. Again, she is easily started into tergiversation, as we see from the affair of the handkerchief which she declares is not lost; and repeats the falsehood with most emphatic iteration. It is not with the view of reducing Desdemona's claim upon our affection that I here mention these faults, which, as Heraud says, "only render her more womanly, and are mainly those of her sex, ay, and the most amiable of her sex" ('Shakespeare: His Inner Life,' 275), but with the view simply of showing that Desdemona is not a bundle of symbolic attributes, but only a woman who lacks that courage and outspokenness which might have defeated Iago's malice, and that she manifests that fatal foible of fibbing, but for which the tragedy might not have been possible at all. I have also taken notice of this falling away from truth through physical frailty in a woman otherwise so free from sin, in order to mark the poet's own deep reverence for, and keen interest in, moral truth. On which point see the remarks of Gervinus in the 'Commentaries,' 506 and 928. Desdemona is a saint in all things save one —she wants the orthodoxy of straightforwardness.

V.

It is susceptible of proof, then, that the Moor's motives and actuating principles are pure. But unhappily his "disordered power, engendered within itself to its own destruction," hastens on the dreadful disaster by which his life is wrecked. In the long-run passion perverts principle, and suffering enfeebles will. Mere suspicions and suggestions attain the force and validity of fixed ideas. An exaggerated sentiment sways his judgment; and criminal counsels mould his actions towards an evil issue. In other words, his moral nature undergoes a change through the cunning infiltration of evil persuasions by his deadly enemy; and the corrupt propensities thus and thereby engendered are stimulated into overt acts of cruelty and revenge by his inherited morbid blood.

This, I venture to submit, is the view which the poet intended we should take. For at the very outset (Act i. sc. 3) he causes Othello to allude to the vice of his blood; and in Act iii. sc. 3 we discover that the Moor has at least a clearly defined idea as to "nature erring *from itself*" in the case of others. In this regard, then, the individual may perhaps to a certain extent be exonerated and Nature criminated. But for the fiery blood which Othello can temporarily cool, but which he cannot permanently change, the dangerous conceits of Iago would in all likelihood fail of their purpose.

His impulsive nature is incapable of patient inquiry. Imaginative, superstitious, and credulous, his mind is enfettered by a single idea that has been adroitly yet casually conveyed to him. His mental powers, enfeebled by prolonged contemplation of its appalling grossness, are unable to resist its plausibility. All his natural confidence has forsaken him, and he is unable to liberate himself from a pestilent delusion. When his suspicions are excited, and his passions are aroused, both *probability* and *importance* are wrongly estimated. His past life at once appears to him like a mirage—a vast creation of light and beauty that has rested on pillars of mockery and fraud. And no longer able,

under the weight of this intolerable conviction, to restrain the savage instincts of his nature that suddenly gain ascendancy over his nobler impulses, he snaps asunder with his own hand the one golden link that binds him to this earth, knowing full well that with the death of her whom he has hitherto considered perfect in grace and purity life will become unbearable, and death the one rapturous energy that remains to him. His is not the nature to live through all his pain with calm, clear-eyed endurance; and therefore it may, I think, be fairly assumed that he secretly determines his own death at the moment when he conceives the idea of killing Desdemona. He cannot, and will not, survive his shame.

Shakespeare thus unfolds to us two distinct types of evil—the exceptional or preternatural, and the ordinary or natural. The one excites our loathing; the other only moves our pity. For whilst it is sad to die as Othello dies, it is terrible to live as Iago lives, "devouring the dust and stinging."[1] Iago embodies the tough, acrid, half-animal nature that by an intrinsic necessity sins against light boldly and remorselessly. But Othello is a simple, credulous, heroic soul who lives the life of nature. He is trustful and thoughtful, fearless but full of love: a being who blends rugged strength with dove-like gentleness, nursing the tempest in the solitudes of his soul whilst with child-like avidity he drinks in strange joys of life, keeping his "heart upon his sleeve" the while "for daws to peck at." Both, it is true, are criminals, but how different is the nature of their crime!

VI.

Othello, it is plain, does not rush wantonly into evil; but, seduced into a path that leads to darkness, strangeness, and uncertainty, he is overmastered by the passions which he ought to have ruled. In this regard he resembles Marius in Hugo's 'Les Misérables'—he resolves not to doubt, and straightway begins doubting. Circumstance, in the guise of Jealousy, pierces the one loose rivet in his armour. Mark what he says to Iago:—

[1] See Dowden, 'Shakespeare: His Mind and Art,' 243.

> "By the world,
> I think my wife be honest and think she is not;
> I think that thou art just and think thou art not.
> I'll have some proof. Her name, that was as fresh
> As Dian's visage, is now begrimed and black
> As mine own face. If there be cords, or knives,
> Poison, or fire, or suffocating streams,
> I'll not endure it. Would I were satisfied!"

The passion of jealousy is certainly antipathetic to his normal nature. He is not easily provoked to jealousy; but, "being wrought," he is so perplexed that he yields to the very temptations which are associated with that morbid passion. In other words, the weak susceptibility to malign influences acting from without proves as fatal in the result as if the generic passion of jealousy, self-generated and self-nourished, had been an original element in the normal emotional nature of the man. He is assuredly finely touched to fine issues; but the finest innermost fibres of his structure are brought into fatal antagonism with the nature of outward things; and behind the nobleness of his character there lurks the distrust, suspicion, and mean cunning of the savage.

Of course I do not here use the term "savage" in the sense in which Schlegel employs it. For no one nowadays ever thinks of confounding the chivalrous Moorish chief with a barbarous negro. I simply allude to that emotional savagery both in speech and action to which the most exalted and well-balanced natures are potentially subject, and which in Othello's case, by reason of the terrible inflammability of his Mauritanian blood, gains an exceptionally tragic intensity. He is strongly influenced by the national *esprit de tribu;* and in the basis and spirit of his positive morality, he gives the most vivid expression to the dominant predilections of his race. Though a gallant Moor of royal birth, his sense of justice is obviously cast in the most primitive mould; and, whilst he has done much to check and overcome the vices of his blood, he has not altogether escaped from his ancestors, or entirely risen above that sensational naturalism which coloured all their ethical conceptions, or attained the rank of a "being of large discourse, looking before and after," who is able in all things to

constitute the inner spiritual law of his nature the rightful master of his will.

His being is obviously divided, as Schlegel points out, into a higher and a lower sphere; and ultimately the physical force of passion checks and subdues the noblest instincts and impulses of a nature which has hitherto remained untried in its tenderest and most vital part. His "perfect soul" has a peccant part which, by the operation of foreign influences, may be forced into a mortal distemper, and so lead to the complete displacement of the moral balance of his being.[1]

It is the nature of perfect love to promote confidence, to "cast out all fear"—the Scriptural deliverance manifestly extending even to human attachments—and to rest with the repose of certainty on the object which has excited and nourished it. Suspicion, in a word, becomes as impossible as hate, for it is the function of the perfect or purely intentioned soul which is warmed and animated by this the most generous of human passions to restrain its emotions within reasonable limits, and to protect unsullied the brightness of the image which it has set up for worship. Othello's blindness, however, to the necessity of thus observing a wise moderation in the conduct of life is painfully apparent throughout. And he shows by his allusions to fate and a "destiny unshunnable" that his credulous superstition has seduced him into acceptance of that popular and

[1] Let me here say a word as to this phrase "perfect soul," which reminds one of the vainglorious boasting of Hector in the 'Iliad' of Homer, or Ajax in the Sophoclean tragedy. Noah, Job, and Asa are thus spoken of (Genesis vi. 9, Job i. 1, 1 Kings xv. 14); but neither in Othello's nor in their case is the word "perfect" employed in the sense in which it is used in Hebrews xii. 23—"just men made perfect." Shakespeare means what the Old Testament writers meant—that is, Othello, who from the height and enduring basis of the Past seems to defy the Future, is only sincere and well-intentioned; not as the spirits of the just in heaven, absolutely free from all sin. Still, it is an idle vaunt, and therefore highly reprehensible. Indeed, viewed in the light of his boasted self-sufficiency, which, as the sequel shows, amounts virtually to self-apotheosis, Othello's course and conduct form perhaps the best commentary on the words of an inspired apostle, "Let him that thinketh he standeth, take heed lest he fall" (1 Corinthians x. 12). The phrase has also some light thrown on it by a line of the poet Donne—

"Who knows his virtue's name and place, hath none."

delusive doctrine which in effect makes his Creator responsible for those sins and temptations which at one time of his life he might certainly have avoided or overcome.

And this leads me to observe that in acting as he does towards Desdemona Othello impiously becomes a god to self. You have here self-worship in the form of self-will. Like Admetus in the great domestic play of Euripides, he loves his wife much, but in the crisis of his passion he seems to love himself more. Morality he does think of, but now only in connection with his individual and prescriptive rights. Religion, too, is present to his mind, but it neither affects his purpose nor checks his hand.

> "*Othello.* If you bethink yourself of any crime
> Unreconciled as yet to heaven and grace,
> Solicit for it straight. . . .
> Think on thy sins.
> *Desdemona.* They are loves I bear to you.
> *Othello.* Ay, and for that thou diest."

In his imagined purity of purpose he subordinates everything to an advancement of the inward worth of his own personality, or to the happiness or necessities of an earthly state of existence alone, as we discover from the first words of that great soliloquy with which the second scene of the last Act opens, and which Salvini utters with an intonation of almost unfathomable thought and tenderness :—

> "It is *the cause*, it is *the cause*, my soul !—
> Let me not name it to you, you chaste stars !—
> It is *the cause*."

This reason for action, which resembles that of Leontes in "The Winter's Tale" (ii. 3), is necessarily a mere moral or earthly one—that is, it has relation only to the abhorrent crime of which he supposes this heavenly innocent to be guilty. It can obviously have no connection whatever with the higher principle of Religion, which in all civilised communities transfers to a future state the penalty due to such offences. Notwithstanding that he looks upon the action to which he is about to proceed as a punitive

rather than an avenging deed, he has here plainly divorced Religion from Morality. He is obdurate in his primitive piety which, in effect, has these words of Augustus Hare's for its guiding maxim: "To those whose god is honour, disgrace alone is sin."

Othello's whole discourse is essentially materialistic. When he is giving his victim those fond ~~but fatal farewell~~ kisses, it is not religion, or the voice of God within him, that almost turns him from his purpose; it is her "*balmy breath*, that dost almost persuade Justice to break her sword." For a moment the perception of her exquisite beauty predominates over his thirst for revenge:—

> "Be thus when thou art dead, and I will kill thee,
> And love thee after." [1]

He cannot uproot his love any more than he can destroy her soul; but still her body must be sacrificed as an oblation to his outraged honour. The suspected immorality of the "weed" who still smells so sweet that the sense aches at her, urges him to commit this crime with all the stoical fortitude of a judge. He recognises no limit to his own self-will, which has now become the law of his life; trusting entirely to his own violent inward legislation, he here administers a judiciary function; and so, like the fetich-worshipper who breaks his idol whenever his desires are crossed, he treats the idol of his heart as a property which may be arbitrarily destroyed. Othello, in a word, confounds duty which presupposes reverence for law, with revenge, which Lord Bacon was wont to call a species of *wild justice*.

And the essentially material object which dictates the sacrifice appears still more distinctly in the words, "She must die, *else she'll betray more men*";—a forcible exemplification, I think, of the truth of Carlyle's axiom that the visible becomes the Bestial when it rests not on the invisible. For Othello would thus endeavour to prove in point of fact that the natural law of justice is the only real preventive of crime; and this judicial

[1] "'Be thus when thou art dead, and I will kill thee, and love thee after,' is a sentiment characteristic of, and fit only to be uttered by a Moor."—'An Essay on the Dramatic Character of Sir John Falstaff,' by Maurice Morgann, (1st edit. 1777), 60 *note*.

blindness produced by a twofold cause—the persistent craft of Iago, and the blind motions of his own hot Moorish blood —is even more strikingly illustrated in the first scene of the fourth Act:—

"*Iago.* Strangle her in her bed,—even the bed she hath contaminated. *Othello.* Good, good; *the justice of it pleases;* very good."

Here religion is nothing, and ostensibly morality is everything, But still the *savage* gains the ascendancy over the *moral* man: the physical force of passion subdues and renders ineffective all acquired and habitual virtues; and, with the instinct of his race, with whom the *jus primæ noctis* was paramount, and who with their own hands murdered an adulterous wife, and hired assassins to destroy her paramour—things present here, for is not Iago (iv. 1, 223) engaged as Cassio's "undertaker"?—he stifles the divine Desdemona on her nuptial bed.

In Othello's proceedings, then, we recognise the extreme limit of ethical fanaticism. With him duty is not in reality the ground determinative of human conduct, but individual honour and personal merit. At first he plumes himself on meritorious worth and indulges in an overweening and fantastical turn of thought. In the end he dispenses altogether with moral commandments and divine appointments; and finds the spring of action not ethically in the law, but sympathetically in his own sensitive nature, which clings with tenacity to the arbitrary code of honour peculiar to his race, and which sanctions the idea that punishment is an act emanating from the private authority of the individual alone. He thus basely depreciates all the higher forms and holier functions of Religion, and proudly oversteps the limits and barriers of human reason, which, as Kant tells us, forbids man to place the subjective determinator of his will anywhere else than in the law, "or to entertain sentiments in his maxims other than reverence toward this law," which in all civilised communities makes something more of murder than a capital crime against *itself.*

CHAPTER V.

QUISNAM IGITUR LIBER?

I.

Now whilst I have laid special stress in the course of the preceding observations on the fact that hereditary influences have been powerfully instrumental in bringing about the catastrophe, I am not to be considered as favouring the theory of necessity. Taking into account the manner of his ensnarement and the nature of his overthrow, at once so cruel and complete, so unprovoked and irremediable, it assuredly looks as if Othello has been signalled out by the Fates, and preappointed to death, like the King of Pheræ in the Euripidean tragedy of "Alcestis." Viewing the particular circumstances that lead to his undoing, and the widespread malignancy that at every point assails him, it seems as if he is held up by a wicked and relentless Destiny; as the hateful Sphinx, in the dark poetic fable which Sophocles has so sublimely immortalised, held the Theban in her clutches, a mark for the arrows of all his enemies.

This, as truly as the others, is a sad drama of Nemesis. The hero seems to be smitten by the arbitrary doom of some blind and purposeless power. But there is a point at which the resemblance dwindles and fades away. Here, in contradistinction to the ground-idea of ancient tragedy, the liberty of the central figure is in no respect restricted, disputed, or denied. The fate which the Greeks made to operate from without is here recog-

nisable in a vice of the blood, a defect of character, a hereditary predisposition. Heredity may *suggest* Fate; but Conscience, which is man's practical reason, and the judge over all his actions, *proclaims* Freedom, which is a pure product of the moral sense. Liberty is the one indivisible and unoriginated birthright of man. It pertains to him by force of his humanity. But it derives its strength and value from voluntary subjection and outward conformity to the law, which, determining the causality of freedom, sets a limit to the actions of the individual; and, although flowing apparently from sources external to himself, it is still the necessary effect of pure practical reason, towards which it behoves him to show due respect and reverence, since it always provides somewhat fit for the regulation of a free will. Freedom and law, in other words, point reciprocally to one another. This, I take it, is the Shakespearian as truly as it is the Kantian view.

Notwithstanding his inherited tendencies, Othello had the power of victorious self-amelioration under the impulse of that spirit which was in him, but not of him; and which is here expressly postulated and believed in. And it is noteworthy that the poet, true to his own innate ideas, causes the Moor to demonstrate the absolute freedom of his choice and action *up to a certain point* in the very speech in which, addressing the Venetian notables, he seeks to attribute his ruin to the malignant force of an inexorable Fate.

> "I have seen the day,
> That, with this little arm and this good sword,
> I have made my way through more impediments
> Than twenty times your stop."

Here he is not referring to the bygone vigour of disabled age, albeit he has declined into the vale of years. He is rather alluding to the bright unclouded day of liberty—the liberty of law and order or moral freedom, when he looked on man and nature with a large and generous and fearless eye. For he continues—

> "But, O vain boast!
> Who can control his fate? *'tis not so now.*"

Here, plainly, we are to infer a misemployment of gifts and

powers. The day of anarchical liberty, with its dim stupidity and baseness and deadly lawlessness, has dawned; and the sweetness and poetry of life have vanished. He is hurried forward by the stream of necessity, like a rudderless ship drifting before a storm; no longer able to take up the broken threads and unite the ends of life, or, wave-like, gather up his moral forces and bravely fling himself upon the world again, he is sucked down into the black abyss of death by the awful weight of his own fell purposes. Now only for him "'tis happiness to die." No other way of escape from his gnawing misery presents itself, and no avenue opens to atonement but this. Like Ajax, he has been impiously self-reliant. Like him, he is pursued by the divine Nemesis, and eventually thrown into the chaos of madness. Gradually recovering, he perceives his irretrievable folly, and discovers, in the language of the antique tragedy, that as he has "lost use, and name, and fame," there is nothing left for him but to die.

The day was when Othello was master of himself, and rightly so of others; when, as the artificer of his own fortune, he could oppose efforts to obstacles, and, according to the absolute spontaneity of his freedom, rise superior to fate. Infinitely alluring and attractive was he then: a great power, a great hope, strong to shatter and create. Then he could have rent, like stubble-withes, the fetters of his foes. But it is not so now! Criminality has reduced the brave to a level with the pusillanimous.[1] His occupation is gone, and his life is degraded, desolated, doomed. The once puissant arm is rendered impotent by shame and blood-guiltiness; and he stands—"he that *was* Othello"—a being of penetrable arms and vulnerable flesh.

Bitterly inveighing a Destiny that cannot be shunned, like some Homeric hero whose soul, folded in the shroud of damnation, descends to Orcus bewailing the hardness of its fate; and, thinking, with measureless sighs of regret, of the unmerited evil that has come upon him; of the life that has been maimed and marred, and the trust that has been defeated and defrauded; of the beauty and the bounty of the world he perforce must quit,

[1] See Steevens' 'Shakespeare,' x. 297.

and the hope and the happiness that will never more be his, he cries in very agony of soul :—

> "Here is my journey's end, here is my butt,
> And very sea-mark of my utmost sail.
> Do you go back dismay'd? 'tis a lost fear;
> Man but a rush against Othello's breast,
> And he retires. Where should Othello go?
> Now, how dost thou look now? O ill-starr'd wench!
> Pale as thy smock! when we shall meet at compt,
> This look of thine will hurl my soul from heaven,
> And fiends will snatch at it. Cold, cold, my girl!
> Even like thy chastity. O cursed slave!
> Whip me, ye devils,
> From the possession of this heavenly sight!
> Blow me about in winds! roast me in sulphur!
> Wash me in steep-down gulfs of liquid fire!
> O Desdemona! Desdemona! dead!
> Oh! Oh! Oh!"

Othello has had a life of almost unexampled sorrow and suffering: now for consolation he seeks a Hell! It would seem, then, that the thwarting influence of Circumstance has at last proved too strong for this acknowledged Strongest, this all-in-all-sufficient perfect soul whom passion could not shake; and that the drama is intended to illustrate the superiority of wisdom and prudence, conciliation and self-control, over mere physical strength and passion and the stern oceanic force of a reckless and immovable individualism.

II.

The ancient sage inquired, "Who is free?" and he replied to his own question in the words, "The wise man who is master of himself." To a similar question, then, Shakespeare here renders a similar answer. The Moor is not the artificial product of Circumstance; nor is he born its thrall. Opportunity simply quickens a latent wickedness into conscious action; and the destiny, not only of himself, but of others, lies in reality in his own strong volcanic passion. The circumstances which mar and

maim his life are not of his devising, yet they are in an important sense the product of the man himself. For his stupidity not less than Iago's subtlety, his suspicion not less than the Ancient's suggestion of treachery, his ready acceptance of the "evidence" of Desdemona's infidelity—confirmations, imputations, and "strong circumstances" in support of a mere doubt or fear, which, from their second-handedness, would be weak and worthless as gutter-scraps to any honest and discerning mind anxiously in search of *proof*, perhaps, but which are picked up by Othello's eager, untried intellect, that slander with its inevitable bit of trivial but tormenting truth in its treacherous heart, has corrupted and inflamed, and accepted as living reasons of disloyalty—no less than the adroitness and dexterity with which Iago manufactures this damning evidence, which eventually rings him round with an ever-galling hoop of deadliest necessity, are palpably the occasion of his stumbling, degradation, and collapse.

Emerson tells us truly that Fate, which involves the melioration, is simply a name for facts and unpenetrated causes. But the Moor has little or no eye for facts. He takes a large and generous view of life, it is true; but he accepts and treats its events and occurrences literally, trustfully, almost unquestioningly. Wherefore, when in his careless innocence and inexperience of the inexorable logic of life and fact he is forced to consider what so closely concerns him, he finds in the inner meaning of even the simplest things a deep dazzling darkness, and a soul-moving and soul-maddening mystery.

And one so easily misled by visible and material effects is naturally a mere child at unriddling the complex conundrum of moral causes which move cryptically. His mind is essentially simple, credulous, incurious. He has no faculty for dealing with the occult, no capacity for interpreting the dark enigmas of the human soul, no force at his command to wrest from the bosom of the demi-devil the secret motive which has caused him thus to plot and plan against his peace and ensnare his soul and body. Wherefore, when taken in the toils, he clutches eagerly at the antique, unearthly, and discredited conception of an immutable Fate, and fancies, like some world-weary believer in the

"tremendous creed" of Æschylus, that he is borne down by the invincible might of Necessity, whose chain encircles and binds the universe like Saturn's ring,—crushed by that unshunnable Destiny from which even a god was powerless to escape.

It is hardly necessary to say that with such beliefs and notions there is no immediate possibility of melioration here. Misfortune always makes the superstitious and unbalanced mind fatalistic and sceptical. And thus Othello simply meets and placidly accepts his fate, like Œdipus or Ajax. Perplexed by facts which he cannot comprehend, abused and wrought upon by causes which, to him at least, must remain impenetrable, he ceases to be what he once was, the victorious subduer of Circumstance, and falls beneath it vitally wounded, a self-blinded, and, in a certain sense, a self-overmastered victim. For he foregoes all saving inquiry, neglects every opportunity, mistakes even the evidence of his own senses, persistently confounds the false with the true, and casts from him those better experiences and those holier impulses which, in the darkest moment of his doubt and difficulty, during the fearful grapplings and strugglings of his mind with matters that baffled its powers of solution, should have acted as weapons and wings of defence and ascension against the assaults of the devil and the lure of hell. A man is not free when he chooses what he *wishes*, but only when he prefers what he *ought*. This is one of the profoundest meanings with which the play is fraught; a personal bosom-meaning, too, that is likely to reward the most searching ethical study by whomsoever undertaken and conducted.

Like ourselves too often, Othello, who is intrinsically a noble being, is certainly no wise one. He blamefully forgets, or stupidly ignores his own frailty. He desires to be, and honestly imagines he is, what he affects and appears to be. Confiding in his "perfect soul," he starts life with the tacit persuasion that his conduct will in all things be as pure and equable as he believes his intention and actuating principle to be; that all his actions, in other words, will exactly tally with the autonomy of a *pure* will. But he has no true knowledge of himself. He quickly

yields to the serpentine influences of Iago, which he could not of course foresee; falls under resultant temptations which now he has neither discernment nor power to shun; and when the serpent-charms of self-deceit are broken, he has nothing in reserve wherewith to rescue and recover himself. The balance of his noble and sensitive nature is instantly and irretrievably lost. With this forfeiture of self-control he ceases to be master of his fate. His entire life passes under the dominion of necessity. Once put into dissonance with his better nature, his soul is unable to resume its moral self-possession; and in one day he finally commits a deed which no following one can ever wipe out. Unballasted, water-logged, and rudderless now—to avail myself of a nautical figure—with little or no keel of deep-grasping reason left, he is unable by any fresh effort of his own to make up the leeway of his life-voyage, and is therefore driven back a helpless derelict on the rugged sea-lashed Scylla of a crime-stained Past.

> "O thou Othello, that wert once so good,
> Fall'n in the practice of a damned slave,"

what—to change the form of Lodovico's interrogatory—shall now be said of thee?

III.

It is evident, however darkly conscious of it the poet himself may have been, that Shakespeare in his delineation of Othello has enforced and illustrated the important truth that the metaphysic of ethics, whilst necessarily applying to Anthropology, cannot rest on it as a final postulate. I am satisfied that what is scientifically known as Moral Anthropology, by which is meant the subjective obstacles or assistances which the moral law may meet with in the human constitution,[1] cannot properly be dispensed with in any inquiry such as that which I am here pursuing. And hence I have treated, perhaps at too great length, the question of the Moor's inherited evil tendencies or innate dispositions, and have presented these as powerful motive forces or direct contributory

[1] Kant, 'Metaphysic of Ethics,' 157.

causes in producing the tragic catastrophe by which he is overwhelmed.

But it is obvious that this idea, which resembles the abstract notion of the unjust transmission of original sin, cannot be accepted as a just and valid standard of judging in ethics, or employed as a fair and legitimate excuse for wrong-doing, since it manifestly tempts us to forget or ignore the authoritative conclusions resulting from the supreme and all-binding Moral Law. And therefore I have not so urged it. The particular nature of a man may perhaps help to *explain* an event, but it can in no sense *justify* the action which creates and renders it possible. At the most, moral anthropology can give but a partial and imperfect account of the sudden transformation which here takes place in the moral nature of the Moor. Therefore, whilst thus admitting it as a subordinate element in the elucidation of the ethical problem which the case presents, the terrible degeneracy of a being so heroic and exalted as Othello must necessarily be referred to some other cause; and that palliation which, with our favourable preconceptions, we are naturally anxious to find for his faults, must necessarily have reference to something more reconcilable with the logic of fact and the commoner experiences of mankind.

To what cause, then, are we to ascribe his most fatal deviation from rectitude? Upon what appreciable fact or circumstance are we to base our exculpatory plea? Paradoxical as it may seem, Othello's temporary madness is the divine nepenthe which is thrown into that moral disaster which almost tears the heart out of us. This it is which diverts our thoughts from blame to pity: from the gross horror of the crime to the unmerited suffering which has inevitably led to it. This it is too which somehow limits and restricts the doctrine of free agency when applied to Othello's case. Without resorting, as himself does, to any obsolete notion, or taking refuge under any old-world mythus like Necessity or Fate, it seems to me that a good case can be made out in his behalf. The comprehensible idea of criminal irresponsibility is not vetoed by the circumstances.

Whilst all morality implies free agency, the responsibility of an

agent is essentially conditioned on the perfect possession of all his volitions. And therefore it goes without saying that as morality is a product of the pure healthy human instinct, and as a man without health is not regularly the master of his own purposes, or, in other words, a free agent in an absolute sense, since—as is here the case—his reasoning power may be perverted, his power of comparison or judgment disordered, and his faculty of volition destroyed thereby, he may justly be exonerated from that amount of responsibility which is exacted from one who is physically and mentally sound. The interdependence of physical and moral sanity is indisputable. And it is mark-worthy that Christianity and not Casuistry places health as the basis of all moral freedom or perfect voluntary action. Bodily affliction produces a complete change in the moral nature. For, as the saying goes, "Health keeps an atheist in the dark;" and of this truth a memorably vivid reflection is to be found in the passionate pleading of Paracelsus in Mr Browning's powerful poem, which reminds one of poor Lear's piteous deprecation of on-coming madness:—

> "God! Thou art Mind! Unto the Master-Mind
> Mind should be precious. Spare my mind alone!
> All else I will endure. . . . . .
> . . . . . *But if my spirit fail,*
> *My once proud spirit forsake me at the last,*
> *Hast Thou done well by me?* So do not Thou!"

It is clear that the loftiest and most direct nature may become warped into indirectness and crime by the subtle and mysterious machineries of bodily disease. The more so if unhappily it is distinguished by a sympathetic excitability of unusual acuteness. Men of the neurotic type like Othello are especially ill-adapted for resisting the effects of great mental excitement. They are speedily overcome by extreme mental tension, whether that be occasioned by the ordinary stress of life, the pressure of a sudden grief, or the consciousness of an unmerited injury. Between their mental and their moral states, moreover, there is a complete and thorough-going connection.

It would of course be foreign to the purpose of this criticism

to illustrate by profuse examples this close dependence of moral changes on physical changes. Suffice it therefore to say that their concomitance can readily be perceived in persons of the constitutional type of Othello, in whom you find a great development of muscular strength, and a sympathetic excitability of exceptional keenness and intensity. In such cases anything which tends to guide and train the nerves to a state of permanent irritation and acritude prepares a *nidus* or strongly neurotic basis for the action of disease. Sudden and violent outbursts of emotion derange the functions of the body; great mental depression enfeebles all its organs; and the derangement of reason, and the consequent destruction of the faculty of volition, are the results which most frequently follow.[1]

And this, I think, meets the case before us. Here you have an overwrought nervous system constantly stimulated to the very verge of morbid congestion by a wild and ungovernable passion. Iago with devilish art, which anticipates and provides against every reaction and leaves no chance of relief and rest, trains Othello's nerves to a state of permanent irritation; and through unwise indulgence of his emotions, which presses on to the very verge of frenzy the excitement to which the Ancient's irritating stimulants originally gave rise, there is suddenly cast upon his nature, which age, labour, and grief have sorely tried, the unbearable burden of acute disease. From this there springs what is technically called impulsive or paroxysmal mania, which here makes its final and most marked manifestation in the murder of Desdemona. The fixed derangements of his health result in the most serious debilitation of his moral energies; and every string in "the fine harp of human volition" becomes jarred and untuned by the impulses of mental and bodily disease. In a word, his physical agitation is strictly in accordance with that of his moral constitution.

Shakespeare has thus taken care to give a precise physical reason for the moral degeneration of so noble a being. In the epileptic seizure (Act iv. sc. 1) he has marked the concurrence of temporary mental derangement with moral insanity.

[1] See De Quincey's paper on "Casuistry," 'Works,' viii. 288-300.

To the weakening effect of this epileptic attack on Othello's mind I attach the utmost importance. It presents us with phenomena belonging to the physiology of the man which must, I think, enter, as factors of special importance, into any valid scheme of his psychology. Wherefore I propose in what remains of this chapter to examine in detail (1) the actual existence of this terrible malady; (2) the skill and accuracy with which it is described; (3) the poet's intention in introducing this element of physical disease into the play; and (4) the importance which attaches to it ethically.

Whilst frankly acknowledging the general accuracy of Shakespeare's knowledge of epilepsy, an eminent medical critic of the tragedy has seen fit to assert that Iago's description of Othello's trance in the forecited scene "appears a mere falsehood." [1] And this opinion, it is only right to add, is in strict agreement with the important criticism of Dr C. M. Ingleby and the late Professor Wilson ("Christopher North"). But in each and all of these cases there is nothing but opinion. Indeed the statement which I have quoted is nothing but a piece of rash tentative criticism unsupported by a single shred of textual proof. Iago no doubt is a living lie: a sort of apotheosis of falsity is to be found in him. But the Parcæ have not altogether gone asleep for ever; and so, in the midst of his lying, the Ancient is forced into veracity when perhaps most anxious to conceal or manipulate the truth. This fact, which will presently demand attention, these writers have studiously overlooked.

In all essential particulars Iago's description agrees with Casca's terse report of Cæsar's epilepsy in the Roman play which Dr Bucknill accepts as authentic.[2] Nay, more, we have here a complete and precise detail of the symptoms which usually precede and follow the typical epileptic fit (*grand mal*). The whole visible phenomena are accurately described, whilst the terrible potentialities of such a case are also significantly suggested—the foaming at the mouth and the maniacal excitement

[1] Bucknill, 'The Medical Knowledge of Shakespeare,' 1860, 274.
[2] See "Julius Cæsar," Act i. sc. 2.

which so frequently supervene; and that "savage madness" into which, as Iago asserts, Othello may "by-and-by break out," the inference being that in *the fit of yesterday* (iv. 1, 52) he had already betrayed these symptoms. Is, then, Iago's story false? And if so, why has the poet paid such minute regard to symptomatology? In view of the theory which I have ventured to advance these questions demand an answer. Indeed, having regard to the murder of Desdemona, the only claim which the Moor has upon our favour and sympathy depends entirely on the almost accidental truthfulness of his Ancient, since Kant has distinctly affirmed that "the state of mind in which a bad action is perpetrated, whether unagitated or inflamed, will greatly change the imputation both of the deed and its consequences:" a deliverance which helps to throw some light upon Othello's own account of "these unlucky deeds," in which he declares, when the frenzy of his excitement has abated, and he is again restored to something like reason, that he is "an honourable murderer."

It is assuredly Iago's interest to cover the actual cause of Othello's sudden illness from Cassio, who unexpectedly comes upon the scene. It is likewise a most prudential course on his part to prevent, as best he can, the Moor's return to consciousness during Cassio's presence. For he naturally labours under the impression that he may take up the interrupted thread of their conversation, and incautiously reveal the circumstances which led to the attack. Trusting to the speedy withdrawal of the lieutenant, who, like most persons in such situations, is influenced by an exaggerated idea of the immediate danger of the fit, Iago apparently throws obstacles in the way of Othello's recovery; and yet he actually does nothing more perhaps than any nineteenth-century physician would do in like circumstances. For, as is laid down in every clinical manual on the subject, violence must in all cases be avoided when, as here, the disease is established. That is, as the Ancient expresses it, "the lethargy must have his quiet course," otherwise the progress of the malady will be accelerated, and something akin to "savage madness" will inevitably supervene. Any attempt to rouse the sufferer in such cases by violent

stimuli, or by dashing water on the face, or, as is here suggested by the bookish and scholarly Cassio, by rubbing him on the temples—measures usually had recourse to in ordinary cases of swooning—is almost certain to be attended by harmful rather than by beneficial results.

But Iago gives another proof of the *bona-fide* character of the seizure. He says to Cassio :—

> "Do you withdraw yourself a little while,
> He will recover straight."

He knows very well that the maintenance of a free circulation of air is in such cases conducive to recovery; and that Cassio's hanging over him, in order to satisfy his keen curiosity, is calculated to defeat that end. Cassio accepts as true the explanation vouchsafed him. He believes,—and why not we, since one witness in support of demonstrable fact is better than a thousand theoretical experts?—that epilepsy is the illness from which the General is suffering, else, treating it as an ordinary case of fainting, he would not have been induced to leave the scene as Iago directed. And to show that I am not claiming for the poet a physiological insight and knowledge to which he has no title in this matter of Iago preventing Cassio from hanging over Othello, and thus excluding from the sufferer the vivifying air, I would refer the reader to the fourth scene of the second Act of "Measure for Measure," in which Angelo, soliloquising on his contemplated seduction of Isabella, says :—

> "O heavens!
> Why does my blood thus muster to my heart,
> Making both it unable for itself,
> And dispossessing all my other parts
> Of necessary fitness?
> *So play the foolish throngs with one that swoons;*
> *Come all to help him, and so stop the air*
> *By which he should revive.*"

But Dr Bucknill—who, singularly enough, cites and sanctions *this* passage as being strictly in accordance with modern physiological science—observes that when Cassio *has* been got rid of

Iago "applies to the patient himself the truthful and correct designation of his morbid state." And in proof of this he cites the lines :—

"I shifted him away,
And laid good 'scuse upon your ecstasy."

But this is far from disproving his former statement to Cassio. This morbid ecstasy, indeed, is of itself a predisposing cause of epilepsy. Iago is therefore concealing rather than revealing the true facts of the case. For he did *not* excuse the "ecstasy" of his victim, but rather called it by its harshest name. On the one hand, it is his object to conceal the *cause* of Othello's illness; on the other hand, it is his interest to conceal its serious *effect*. In daily life we may assign the true name to a friend's malady when a stranger only is concerned. But when we are dealing with the patient himself we usually employ a term of tenderer tone. So Iago, who "knows all qualities, with a learned spirit, of human dealings," when speaking to Cassio, describes the Moor's illness as a fit—"My lord is fall'n into an epilepsy"; but when dealing with the proud-spirited Moor himself, he finds it necessary, or at least advisable, to call it an ecstasy[1]—"a passion most unsuiting such a man." In thus acting Iago simply furnishes another proof of his matchless astuteness. He pampers Othello's pride, which he well knows will be grievously wounded when he gets time to reflect on the weakness and unwisdom which may chance to be attributed to so great a soldier through this sudden yielding of his powers to the claims of grief.

If, again, Shakespeare intended that we should interpret Iago's designation of Othello's trance as a mere falsehood, why, it may be asked, was he so minutely accurate in his description of a well-known malady with which, under any circumstances, it might readily be confounded? Why did he not suggest, through Iago, a mere attack of syncope (fainting or swooning), as he did in the

[1] The true meaning of the word "ecstasy," under which Iago, I think, veils a hint of *madness*, will best be discovered by comparing "Hamlet," iii. 1, 168, and iii. 4, 72-74. Other passages which seem to me to bear on the point are noted under "Ecstasy" in Bartlett's 'Shakespeare Phrase-Book,' 1881, 217.

case of Lady Macbeth,[1] which would have sufficiently served as a proof of great physical weakness, naturally resulting from the violence of his victim's emotions and the nervous shock which his dreadful disclosures had occasioned? Because, I think, our poet clearly discriminated between the causes which invariably induce fainting and those which bring on epilepsy. A fit of passion is seldom the precursor of swooning, whilst it is very frequently the prelude to an epileptic attack. Wherefore Shakespeare, aware of this fact, and anxious to maintain the propriety as well as the harmony of his characters, makes this lofty spirit succumb to an attack of epilepsy, the result of a fit of extreme passion, rather than to syncope, which agrees better with the feminine nature, however bold and criminal it may be, and with the shock of a sudden surprise or the dread of imminent danger, than with a passion of grief so tumultuous and terrible as Othello's. We are led irresistibly to this conclusion by the fact that Iago, when alluding to the seizure, tells the Moor that it occurred "whilst you were here o'erwhelmed with your grief"; and we must remember that afterwards when alone he ponders with jubilant ferocity the probability that his victim will shortly fall into actual and hopeless madness!

It has passed into a proverb that fainting is woman's resource and man's humiliation. As already indicated, the poet has clearly employed *fainting* as a feminine resource in the case of Lady Macbeth. But here, with the utmost propriety, he causes Othello to fall into an epilepsy—a more serious and aggravated form of unconsciousness—in order to mark the utter humiliation of one whose boast it is that he fetches his life and being from men of royal siege; in order to show, besides, how thoroughly the poison of Iago's malice has permeated his entire nature, and enfeebled the vigours of his mind and body. This sudden torpor and insensibility which completely conquers all his fortitude and strength does not denote, as in the case of the Celtic Clytemnestra, a common, natural, and transient weakness, but a painful, deep-seated, and inexorable disease. The epilepsy is the first positive and convincing symptom, indeed, of that mental and physical

[1] See "Macbeth," ii. 3.

enfeeblement or decay which is destined to produce a radical and fatal change in his moral nature.

But this is not all. Shakespeare had probably another object in view in thus dealing with the Moor. The Greeks before Hippocrates called this terrible malady the "sacred disease"; unable to explain the nature of the convulsion, they referred it to the malign interposition of the gods or evil spirits. And the Jews held that persons so afflicted had been taken possession of by evil spirits, or, as they expressed it, with an oblique reference to Paganism, *demons*, to whom in point of fact they ascribed all manner of evil. Epileptics were known as demoniacs (*dæmoniaci*, *obsessi*, or *lunatici*, the latter embodying the prevailing belief in the lunar theory of madness, to which Othello himself alludes in Act v. sc. 2, l. 109). And thus in the Synoptic Gospels Christ is represented as healing those who had unclean spirits and casting out devils; but all such recorded examples of demoniacal possession, whether we have regard to ante-Christian or post-Christian times, show the common and unmistakable symptoms of epilepsy, insanity, and hypochondria.

Now in Shakespeare's time the power which was supposed to belong to evil spirits excited the deepest concern. It was known as possession or obsession. A legitimate element of uncertainty seemed to surround the self-same problems which created an immense amount of strife in medieval times. Catholics exorcised devils, and bigoted Puritans cast out fiends;[1] whilst the more moderate of this latter sect laboured strenuously to effect a compromise which would equally escape the conclusions of Catholicism and avoid the pitfalls of atheism. That is to say, they denied, on the one hand, the possibility under the new economy of devils entering into and possessing the body of a man—a thing, however, which they admitted had taken place in earlier times by the will of God, as in Saul's case; and, on the other hand, they shrank from making any averment which would have the effect of negativing the doctrine that the devils had some power over humanity; but they affirmed, as a middle course, that it was possible that evil spirits, "without actually entering into the

[1] "Comedy of Errors," iv. 4.

body of a man, might so infest, worry, and torment him, as to produce all the symptoms indicative of possession" [1]—the theory of *obsession* thus supplanting that of *possession*. And it is a significant fact that both phases of belief receive a proper sequential embodiment in the last scene of our tragedy:—

(1) "*Othello.* I look down towards his feet; but that's a fable.
If that thou be'st a devil, I cannot kill thee." . . .

(2) "*Othello.* Will you, I pray, demand that demi-devil
Why he hath thus ensnared my soul and body?"

In this matter, as in every other that concerns our poet's principles and purposes, a real advantage is to be gained by placing ourselves in harmony with the life and conduct of his contemporaries; or, in other words, by throwing ourselves back into the mental condition of the people of the Elizabethan age generally.

So far I have endeavoured to show that Shakespeare had two probable motives, each in itself sufficient, for making Othello fall a victim to epilepsy. He either desired (1) to give a striking proof of the terrible humiliation of so proud a spirit; or else he intended (2) to express and embody the customary belief in the mysterious and malignant influence which spirits exercised in or upon mankind—a belief this which obviously affected the current of his thought, whether or not he rendered to it anything like positive intellectual assent.

But now I venture to submit that, apart altogether from questions of motive, there is the most convincing internal evidence to show that Iago's description of Othello's trance is accurate and truthful. This fact is gradually unfolded to us in the course of the third and fourth Acts. We first of all discover in the Moor an irritability of temper, and a growing weakness of memory which it is Iago's interest to refresh at times by making maddening allusions to the Past with its light and love-joy, and contrasting these things with the darkness and degradation of the Present, for thereby its powers are more sensibly impaired since his passion recurs with every fresh re-

[1] Spalding, 'Elizabethan Demonology,' 61, 62.

membrance.[1] These, then, are the first indications of the mind being involved. His faculties yield to the fret of passion. His overwrought mind reacts with fearful force upon his body, every muscle of which is already instinct with agony; spasm and faintness overcome it; and his whole nature quivers beneath the weight of overpowering repulsion and desire.[2] He manifests a disposition to violence, and flies at Iago like a tiger—a certain sign of the total implication of all his mental powers, the crowning proof of his loss of self-control.[3]

I mention these things simply as general characteristics; but the positive symptoms most marked in Othello's case will bear comparison with those to be found in ordinary cases of epilepsy. We have a distinct series of premonitory symptoms—the frontal headache and the weariness;[4] the faintness of his speech, and the trembling of his frame; the dashing of his spirits, and the pitiful hysterical ebullitions which warn us of the coming shock, and the death-like insensibility.[5]

And it is here noteworthy that Iago's obscene fancies and dreadful disclosures are not the occasion of those tremors that so shake him. "It is not words that shake me thus," he says. There is rather some strange internal feeling akin—surely we may assume as much where the other symptoms so closely resemble those of epilepsy—to that premonitory sensation of chilliness (*aura epileptica*) which is characteristic of this disease, and which it puzzles him to explain or account for. Then follows the intermediate symptom—a terrible cry, which invariably ushers in the epileptic storm—a scream or ejaculation of angry agony that marks the very heartbreak of Othello's wrath, "*O devil!*" Then, after the fury of convulsive motion has passed, we have the final symptoms—a sudden fall and total unconsciousness, and the scarcely perceptible ebb and flow of the aerial tide of respiration. Afterwards we have no distinctive trace of actual illness, but simply a feeling of confusion; no paralysis, but a certain degree of excitement, followed by erratic conduct which perhaps is due

[1] Act iii. scene 3, l. 207; and iv. 1, 19.
[2] iii. 3, *passim*.
[3] iii. 3, 365 *seqq*.
[4] iii. 3, 283-285.
[5] iii. 3, 215, 224; and iv. 1, 41.

as much to the mental disturbance consequent upon the seizure as to the violent passion which again recurs. He has not the slightest recollection, moreover, of what has taken place—

> "*Iago.* How is it, general? have you not hurt your head?[1]
> *Othello.* Dost thou mock me?"

Passing from the confusion of monstrous deliria and yelling madness, his mind settles itself in accurate consciousness but imperfect recollection. For he is at once alive to Iago's presence, but totally oblivious to the pertinence of Iago's question or the unhappy incident which called it forth.

Having detailed the most markworthy resemblances between the "trance" of Othello and the typical attack of epilepsy which have occurred to me after an anxious and independent study of the play, I am in hopes that the reader will agree with me in thinking that, apart from Iago's positive assertion, the poet has by his careful and minute presentation of special facts and distinctive symptoms left us no loophole of escape from the conclusion that the Moor's fit of unconsciousness is produced by epilepsy in its most aggravated form. The whole circumstances of the case support Iago's statement, which I therefore unhesitatingly accept as true.

And seeing that when, as here, this disease is fairly established, the powers of the mind as well as the vigours of the body are certain to become enfeebled and subject to decay, the circumstance of Othello's convulsive seizure has, I would venture to submit, an important moral bearing on the development of the tragedy. For otherwise he *might* have kept on his way of moral sanity in the face of all derelictions; or, at worst, giving effect to what would seem to have been his original intention, he might have killed Desdemona's slanderer rather than Desdemona her-

[1] Here also is a point from which epilepsy may fairly be inferred. "The existence of injury from a fall occurring in connection with a fit rather favours the idea of an epileptic attack or convulsion fit of some kind, as consciousness is seldom so suddenly lost in other fits as to prevent some effort at preservation."—Dr Finlayson's 'Clinical Manual,' 1878, 187. Is not Iago's *suggestion* even of injury another cogent proof of the epileptic character of the attack, and also of the marvellous medical knowledge which our poet possessed?

self.[1] In any event—let me also add this piece of conjectural criticism—the difficulties of his case might not have proved insurmountable had not this painful affliction, which suddenly plunges his whole nature into a vortex of preternatural tumult, and fires the train which has long lain ready for explosion, prevented him from properly cherishing his physical resources. In other words, Othello is indirectly led by illness into crime. Epilepsy is the forerunner of madness; and he kills Desdemona *per intervalla insaniæ*. It is this which to me heightens the significance of Coleridge's question, "As the curtain drops which do we pity most?"

[1] Apropos of Desdemona's murder, a serious misconception seems to have occurred as to the means employed for its accomplishment. The text says that Othello "stifles her." But on the stage the invariable practice has been to "improve" upon the poet's plan. She is always stabbed with a dagger after the Moor has uttered the words—

> "Not dead? not yet quite dead?
> I that am cruel am yet merciful:
> I would not have thee linger in thy pain:
> So, so."

These words are sufficiently plain, I think. Othello does not employ any other means of death, but renews his attempt at suffocation; and death indubitably takes place from apnœa or asphyxia. The revival of his half-murdered victim when the mechanical obstacle to respiration is removed (in such cases there is oftentimes a strong disposition to recovery) points to suffocation as the primary cause; and the words "I'll not shed her blood," and "Your niece, whose breath indeed these hands have newly stopped," show conclusively that he has simply repeated more effectively his attempt to stifle her, and that the poet never intended that a dagger should ultimately be employed. And yet Garrick and Fechter, Booth, Irving, and Salvini have all sanctioned this needless and inconsistent innovation, which, strange to say, Steevens, Knight, and Collier among the commentators have expressly justified. On the other hand, Dr H. H. Furness, the editor of the American 'Variorum Edition of Shakespeare,' whose opinion is supported by several eminent medical experts in the United States, has pronounced in favour of the theory that Desdemona's death is procured by suffocation alone. An interesting article on this subject will be found in 'The Gentleman's Magazine,' September 1886.

CHAPTER VI.

EPILOGUE.

I.

WHAT, then, is the final issue of this sublime domestic tragedy? Wit and cunning have certainly succeeded in bringing low a great and noble character. But evil is not triumphant over goodness in the end. The sword of the Flesh is not mightier than the sword of the Spirit. God does not abdicate in favour of Beelzebub. Wretchedness has been the lot of Iago's life; and now his diseased intellectual activities are foiled at last. A defeat that strikes his devilry into dumbness follows all his transient but hideous triumphs; and his very personality, which, made up of egotism and corruption, seems to open its abysmal throat wider and still wider as the horrors accumulate, is at last fixed inexorably by the frost of moral death, and suddenly swallowed up in its own dreary and disgusting chaos. It was not intended that this Python and mud-demon should catch man and his freedom like birds in a snare, and then pass free, triumphant, and unpunished. He has had his one splendid hour of imperious and undaunted devilry, it is true. His mutinous chaotic elements have played sad havoc with all the sanctities of human life, neither Heaven nor Hell peeping through the blanket of the night to cry "Hold, enough!" But now the limit and boundary of what can be done and suffered is reached at last. Darkness and death and wide-yawning dislocation sweep away for ever the

last remnant of his incoherent power and all his aimless fiend-like energies. The pale paralysis of winter, a sort of spiritual *rigor mortis*, or voiceless death-life, seizes and settles down upon his icebound soul—

> "Demand me nothing; what you know, you know;
> From this time forth I never will speak word."

Unviolated by human scrutiny, the hideous secret of his hateful life must remain locked up then in the frozen sterilities of his cruel and callous mind. The doomed desperado has grown torpid by exhaustion at the very moment of the crisis. Burnings with fire and incisions by steel will fail, we know, to extort from him a single syllable. Torments such as Gratiano threatens will not make him move his lips. He is possessed with his own enigma, and within his foul perfidious bosom he carries a terrible sphinx that will devour him and rend him into rags.

Even now what a poor pestilent dead carcass is this Iago, *through* whom in lurid light we seem to see "Satan's invisible world displayed," and *from* whom we turn with unspeakable loathing. Never resting, never wearying, he has built for corruption and Doomsday; yet for him, as for the tortured souls in the Dantean Hell, there is no present hope of death (*Non han speranza di morte*). Othello stabs him; he bleeds; but is not killed. The serpent's bite is *not* to be cured by the serpent's blood; Othello's wrongs are not to be righted thus. And the silence under which Iago here shelters himself as he stands on the very threshold of the shadow and the void convincingly demonstrates that absolute petrifaction of the moral sense, and consequent incapacity for noble pain, which I have elsewhere noted as peculiarly characteristic of the man. Death can strike no terror into this foul galvanic life!

And so in this crisis of revelation and retribution he stands, white as a leper in deadest-looking stillness, before the "tragic loading" of the marriage-bed which has filled the home of the brave Moorish commander with memorial horrors like unto those which filled that regal abode in Mycenæ which Æschylus has unveiled in the "Agamemnon"; abased but unabashed, ex-

posed yet exulting, speechless but shameless; deaf to all pleading, yet, despite the torpid leprosy of his soul, hissing heaven-high like the many-headed coil of Lernean serpents, and fiercely devouring to the last. Dogged and indomitable, this base-born spirit, whose hungry genius is surfeited with horror, will void his venom to the end silently and aimlessly like a cureless ulcer.

Iago's power then, you say, is apparent and triumphant? No. For observe the impotence of this apparent power. A few honest words and this festering falsity goes to pieces: sinks irrecoverably into dumbness and nameless dissolution. The iconoclast has battered out of shape his own false gods, and has made manifest the folly and futility of all his consecrated delusions and deliriums and demonic necromancy. This corrupted and corrupting Egoist was big with powers that fairly dwarfed his world so long as he could gull Roderigo or ensnare Cassio, so long as he could cuckold Othello and besmirch the parts and graces of the General's wife. But now his potences are nullified by the revelation of his pravities. Desdemona's goodness is vindicated, Othello is restored to love, and Cassio is reinstated into favour. And the Ancient? Why, he is already dead as the flesh-fly whom he made his tool. The blithe benignant gullibility of all his victims avails him nothing now. Iago himself is big with mere ruin!

II.

The reader may perhaps remember the incident recorded in ancient history concerning the statue raised by his fellow-citizens of Thasos to Theagenes, a celebrated victor in the public games of Greece. One of his rivals excited by envious hatred went nightly to the square in which the statue stood, and strove by repeated blows to throw it from its place. His perseverance was rewarded. The statue at length moved upon its pedestal, trembled for a moment, then fell; but the petty Vandal was buried beneath the marble wreck! And so Iago, envious of that goodness and greatness which his inhuman and unclean spirit cannot brook, has

laboured strenuously to throw from his place of power and honour the noble unsuspecting Moor, on whom the citizens of his adopted country looked with honest pride as all-in-all sufficient. His persevering guile is also at length successful. By the strength that comes of craft he undermines the object of his vindictive malice, and foully hurls him from his place. Othello wavers and trembles, loses his sustaining principle, and falls from the pedestal of honour to which he has been raised; but the envious and ignoble being whom he trusted is borne down by the weight of his fall!

Poor, splenetic, impotent, dead-dumb devil, what then does thy success amount to after all? In the retrospect of thy villanies thou canst discern no images but those of the insignificant and perishable profits which thou hast gained and squandered; no rewards more enduring than the aimless miseries which thou hast brought to pass. Traitor and dupe at the same time, thou beholdest now with increased and unalleviated bitterness that the object of thy unresting malevolence has been restored to love through the very calamity for which thou hast plotted and planned: that the deluded Moor, the fountains of whose peace thou wert for some mysterious purpose permitted to poison, is reunited to the faithful wife, who,—bitterest of all bitter thoughts to such a soul as thine,—remained unbeguiled by thy subtlety and insidious scheming, uncorrupted by thy lewd lubricities of speech, unconquered by all thy matchless cozenage and chicane. Here at least thou met with something which thou couldst not grasp, and which therefore thou couldst not conquer. In Othello the triumph of thy enmity accomplished itself. For Desdemona thou couldst *not* corrupt. Upon her all thy foul Machiavelism fell harmlessly, for her mind was invulnerable to mortal ills, and her heart was proof against all devils' wiles. But one thing was at least possible for thee: thou couldst throw something of sorrow and hopelessness into her life. To humiliate her, to dwindle her down, to harass and torment her, to dim with bitter tears the azure splendour of those Cenci eyes, and to bring down upon this "child to chiding" the blind and fatal forces of an unreasoning vengeance;—this was a triumph within thy power and

purpose to achieve; and with persevering malice thou *hast* achieved it!

But with what result? What has come of thy obdurate hatred, thy boasted knowledge, thy devil's-pliancy and transcendent truculence? Thine has indeed been the labour of Sisyphus; and yet thou hast but barely received the beggarly reward of the painstaking ant! Thou hast miscarried irremediably after all! Thy very dumbness, thou miserable mass of foul loss and disappointment, is an inarticulate pæan to the One Only Omnipotent who "maketh the wrath of the wicked" and the folly of the foolish "to praise Him." Like Barkilphedro in Hugo's wonderful fiction, thou hast aimed at the eagle; but, so far, thou hast only shot the dove! For though Othello has lost through thee the object of that love, the desire of which enabled him to live, the lack of which now forces him to die, calumny and pain, doubt and disgrace, are somehow vanquished. The Moor voluntarily surrenders life, not with the bitter and half-affected disdain of Romeo and Hamlet; not with the limitless fury and obstinate bitterness of the impotent hater Timon; nor yet with the fierce remorselessness of Macbeth, who, robbed of his delusive belief in his own invulnerability, rushes with fiend-like energy upon a death that is altogether devoid of honour or of loveliness; but with the fortitude and fearlessness of a man predestined to failure, who nevertheless retains to the end the courage, the loyalty, the moral integrity which he prized as his highest possessions, and who with each new proof that is produced of his own error and fatuity advances a fresh claim upon our admiration and love and sympathy, since he remains undaunted but penitent amid the wrecks of life, and full as heretofore of a simple stateliness, a quiet dignity, a passionate tenderness. Loyal now in this insupportable and heavy hour, as in those happy halcyon days at Aleppo, Rhodes, and Cyprus, to the fair and queenly city of his adoption; unmindful even of his private wrongs, which he bears with proud composure, so true it is—as Coleridge, I think, was the first to announce[1]—that *utter* misery "cannot be remembered," he exclaims:—

[1] See the speech of Alhadra in his "Remorse: A Tragedy," Act iv. sc. 3.

> "Set you down this;
> And say, besides, that in Aleppo once,
> Where a malignant and a turban'd Turk
> Beat a Venetian, and traduc'd the State,
> I took by the throat the circumcised dog,
> And smote him, thus."

In a certain sense Othello is made happy by the consciousness that the worst that could befall him has already come. And so, with invincible fortitude, he performs his expiatory offering to the *manes* of the father and the virtue of the wife.

And in this way—so simple, so sudden, so unforeseen—thou art undone, Iago! Thy craft and thy cunning cannot strip him of those heroic remembrances which gather round his Past, and gild with sunset splendours the swiftly waning life: thy transient "fire-flaught of hellish glory" has not destroyed or dimmed those "sparkles of a better hope" that burn with fitful lustre in his throbbing breast; the constant and the cruel pressure of thy foul and faithless spirit has not stilled or stifled those inward promptings which subtly lead him to look through grossness, gloom, and grief towards a fairer Future with the modest and incurious confidence of one who steadfastly believes that, whatever may be the fate appointed for those who like him have "loved not wisely, but too well," he is to be met at last by a Being whose majesty, august and terrible as it is, is still only the majesty of a benevolence and a mercy that surpass all human forgiveness and all earthly love. Thus in the economy of the world Iago is not wholly unnecessary. For he is the spirit that, indeed, always wills evil, but, in spite of himself, works good.

III.

But Othello, you say, has sown the wind. And must he not now reap the whirlwind? Has not his repentance, like that of Polynices, come too late? No, truly! Shakespeare's broad and indulgent humanity would not have it so. Here, as always, he carefully maintains a certain intrinsic and indestructible goodness of nature. To him even the heroic failures of this world are in a

sense indubitable and eternal successes. Is not the Moor "an honourable murderer" who has done nought "in hate, but all in honour"?

To me the significance of Othello's end is in strict speech inexhaustible. But I can only now afford a glance here at what it most obviously symbolises and teaches. Briefly, then, I discover in it the restoration of Law, the resurrection of Right, the reaction of Justice. In this way is the bent and broken balance made straight again. Othello simply yields unreservedly to the joy and grace of conscious obedience. His immolation is demanded by all the tragic necessities of Art and Life as the convincing proof of Desdemona's purity, as the most emphatic avowal of her martyrdom, as the most explicit pledge of his own penitence, as the most touching revelation of an inherent nobility that cannot and will not survive disgrace. His confession of wrong-doing must perforce precede the re-establishment of right: his wild revenge is punished by the inevitable uprising of an even-handed Justice which gives to every one his own. The will of the Supreme Power is thus accomplished. But Othello's horizon is girdled with golden hopes; and through pity and terror *our* feelings are refined and purged. Surely here then we have the essence and marrow of all Tragedy.

Othello's life has been maimed and marred by strange deflections and by serious obstructions. But it has at last its resiliences and reboundings out of strangling death into victory and life. There has been an awful time of sorrow and transcendent suffering. A pitiful sense of sadness and vacancy and failure has followed the first frenzied transports of his angry agony. But now we have a trembling movement of advance and ascension, solemn and holy as a dawn. Othello no longer expends the profound sorrow of his riven heart in vague elegiac wailings to the Earth and Heavens, in *Miserere*-chantings over human life, or in vain remonstrances against inexorable Fate or "destiny unshunnable" like death. To the Venetian notables he has already addressed a speech of explanation, an *apologia*, in which pathos and dignity, repentance and heroic resolution, are beautifully blended.

"Soft you; a word or two before you go.
I have done the State some service, and they know 't.
No more of that. I pray you, in your letters,
When you shall these unlucky deeds relate,
Speak of me as I am; nothing extenuate,
Nor set down aught in malice; then must you speak
Of one that loved not wisely but too well;
Of one not easily jealous, but being wrought,
Perplex'd in the extreme: of one whose hand
Like the base Indian, threw a pearl away
Richer than all his tribe; of one whose subdued eyes,
Albeit unused to the melting mood,
Drop tears as fast as the Arabian trees
Their medicinal gum."

And now we seem to see the hands of desire pleadingly, submissively stretched upward. A strenuous and holy thought arises to harmonise Othello's death with the nobleness of that Ideal Life which he has striven ineffectually to live. The completion of his love has been a crime; but the end of his crime shall still be love—that great elixir of resurrection to every human spirit. With characteristic keenness and truth of imagination the poet has brought into sight this consoling fact. Desdemona's uncle, the solid, practical, but short-sighted Gratiano, therefore errs here: "all that's spoke" is *not* marred:—

"I kiss'd thee ere I kill'd thee; no way but this:
Killing myself, to die upon a kiss."

This has been called "a trifling conceit" to place in the mouth of the dying Othello.[1] I have no hesitation in pronouncing the remark a most trifling piece of criticism. For it contains the root idea of Othello's character. Without this love there was no life possible for him. And the kiss which symbolises its revivification in all its pristine purity and incurious trust is at once the token of purged passion, repentance, reconcilement, atonement.[2] Ardour has dulled and decayed, and a creeping paralysis

[1] By Nathan Drake, in his 'Memorials of Shakespeare,' 1828, 368.

[2] "Not alone did Othello intend, but the poet also intended, that the death of Desdemona should be brought as a sacrifice, and that of Othello as an atonement, to the *manes* of the broken-hearted father."—Gervinus, 'Shakespeare Commentaries,' 545.

has seized upon enthusiasm. But love, which was the loadstar of his life, is also at last the key of his enfranchisement, the blessed balm for the wounded heart and the haunted brain. His hot and furious temper has been chastened, his robust tempestuous vitality has been softened, his proud heart has been humbled to the dust. Humility opens his eyes, and his petulant murmurs and his impious railings cease. The nearer his end approaches the more tranquil and collected he becomes; and all discords melt at last into clearest harmony.

Iago has deprived him of all present and external means of joy and comfort; but the pestilent delusion that made him mad is at length in mercy brushed for ever from his eyes. He is suddenly roused from meditative numbness: life awakens and reality enters. He cannot penetrate into the depth of the mystery of that unmerited evil which has befallen him; but he can perceive the madness and delusion of all mortal pride, the vanity and transiency of all earthly prosperity, the weakness and futility of all human strength, the folly and the insult of a false trust. For a moment he stands no doubt as a terrible impersonation of Chaos-come-again; but the *Fiat lux* is spoken with clear softness as of old; and to his eye the truth of all things stands out calm and fair.

Othello's conscience is quickened and spiritualised. His will is reinforced and purified. His great human affections are allowed to take their course. The flood-gates of his sorrow—that heavenly sorrow which "strikes where it doth love"—are in mercy opened: the bow of peace appears in the clouds; and from the mount of transfigured and purified passion he descries the bourne of restful life. He must hasten to rejoin her who breathed her last with a message of love and forgiveness on those poor blanched lips that wore a higher beauty as they framed that "holy lie." With rash impetuous speed he precipitates himself upon the happiness, the love, the trust that are realised and found anew. "My *life* upon her faith!"—deep strange reading this at last of the early confidence from which he fell! Now all fear that when they "meet at compt" her look will "hurl his soul from heaven" is dissipated by the sweet soul-

soothing knowledge that her love and loyalty, to which he trusts in some vague, undefinable, perhaps idolatrous sense, to "plead for the forgiveness he dares not ask for himself," [1] remained pure and perfect to the end. When one looks upon this scene, as Salvini, for example, acts it, one can very well understand how Coleridge, challenging with real enthusiasm all established beliefs, claimed heaven as the right of Chatterton the suicide. Terrible as it is, there is a beauty in Othello's death. His anguish is tempered into sorrow. His stormy passion is tranquillised into a majestic severity. His life melts into one last rapturous energy; and he dies "upon a kiss."

[1] Lady Martin (Helena Faucit), 'On some of Shakespeare's Female Characters,' 1887, 80.

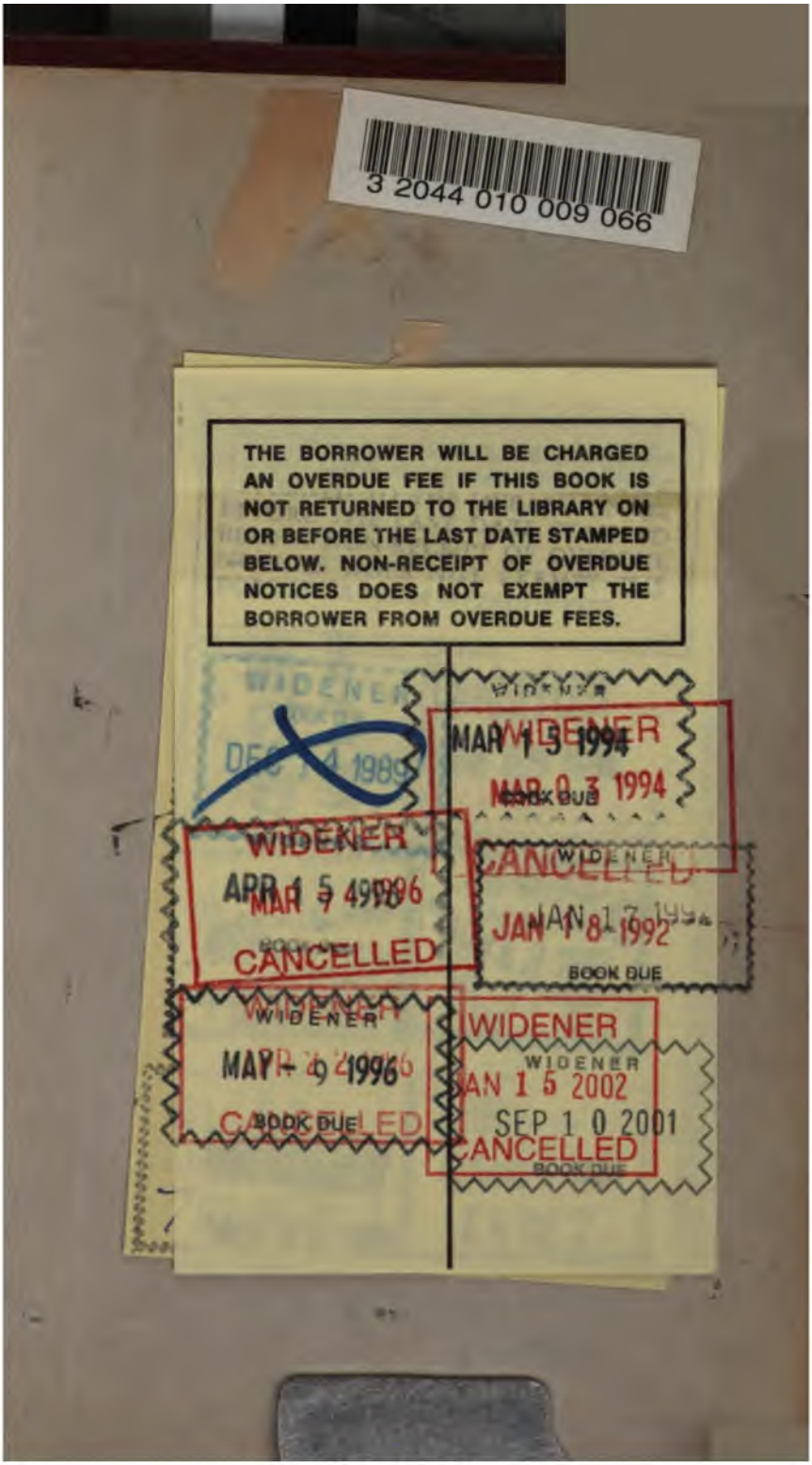
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